

B 51
SH 1
A 16

LIBRARY



1900

GOVT. COLLEGE FOR WOMEN SRINAGAR
LIBRARY
—o—

Class No.

~~F~~ 823

Book No.

K 44 L

Acc. No.

1669

THE LADY IN No. 4

E 22
543

by

RICHARD KEVERNE

Al. 157

COMPUTRIZED

Su No - 154
Al - 4
Su - 3

COLLINS
48 PALL MALL LONDON

cat.



FIRST PUBLISHED 1944
SERVICES EDITION 1945

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
COLLINS CLEAR-TYPE PRESS : LONDON AND GLASGOW
COPYRIGHT

SPIN 4742
U AD NO
CHAPTER ONE LIBRARY

I

HUGH MERROW wondered if he would be disappointed. It was so many years since had seen the place, but he had never forgotten it. It was, he always said, the most typically old English thing he knew in a fast changing England. Instinctively he checked the car as it topped the gentle rise where the road swung sharply to the left.

The tall beech at the corner was still there anyhow. He could see its slender leaves fretting lazily in the faint breeze. Then the roof came in sight, an irregular rollicking sort of roof of mellow red tiles, mottled with lichens and stonecrop, pierced by a great upstanding chimney stack of narrow Tudor bricks.

Merrow gave a little sigh of satisfaction. It was still there, and unchanged, dozing peacefully in the hot July sun. The car slowed and stopped before the Black Boy Inn.

2

The Black Boy is on the outskirts of Wilford village, half a mile perhaps from the church on the village green. It is set well back at the corner where Priory Lane joins the main road. There is a horse trough in the shade of the great beech that stands at the corner, and close by it, the inn's weathered old sign board creaks from a tall post.

It is not easy to distinguish the details of the sign now. A first glance shows vaguely the face of a grinning negro with merry white eyes that stand out in startling contrast to the sombre background. But in certain lights you may see that he wears a turban, now faded to a lovely Sarum red. Beneath the head is painted in old-fashioned lettering the words "Free House."

The house itself is long and low, crowned by a generous roof broken by three beautifully proportioned gables. The front has been plastered for many years and patched from time to time so that its surface is pleasingly irregular. The colour washing of, maybe, a hundred years has given it a rich golden hue that makes the latticed windows gleam like jewels in a ring when the sun catches them. There is a wide tiled porch by the door with deep oak seats on either side where generations of men have sat cosily sheltered from sun or rain to drink their mugs

of beer or cider and talk, as men will in country inns, of seed-time and harvest and the foibles of their neighbours.

Through contented brown eyes, Hugh Merrow took in the Black Boy's age-old serenity as he sat in the car. He found it immensely satisfying. Then slowly he extracted his tall frame and crossed the road. A short, sturdy grizzle-haired man came from somewhere at the back of the house as Merrow entered. In cord breeches and soft leather gaiters he looked more a farmer than an innkeeper.

Hugh Merrow said: "Hallo, Mr. Paternoster. Haven't forgotten me, have you?"

The old fellow's eyes wrinkled in a welcoming smile.

"God bless my soul, if it isn't Mr. Merrow," he said. "Why, Evie and I was only talking about you the other day. I'm right glad to see you, sir. It must be over five year since you was last here."

"Nearer six," Merrow said, "and the old place hasn't changed a bit. Nor have you, Stephen. But I hope you'll be seeing more of me in the future. I want to come and live in these parts. I've come down to look for a cottage."

"Indeed, sir. Then you'll be staying a night or two with us, I hope."

"I shall; if you can put me up."

"We can put you up all right, sir," Paternoster said. "I don't say you'll get all the fal-di-dals you get up at the George in the village, but we're clean and we'll give you good honest food. But you know that, Mr. Merrow." The old man spoke with a touch of bitterness that escaped Hugh Merrow's notice.

"That's good enough for me," he laughed, "but I'm thirsty, Stephen. Can you get me a drink?"

"Come along into the parlour, sir. Now what would you like? The bitter's drawing very nice to-day."

"Bring two pints," Merrow said.

3

The parlour was unchanged too. A cosy, Victorian room, its walls covered by a dingy red paper. Merrow had always wanted to strip that ugly paper, for he was sure that there were honest beams behind that dingy covering. But it was a comfortably homely room despite its incongruous decoration.

Stephen Paternoster returned with two foaming glass mugs. "Ah!" Merrow exclaimed. "That looks grand. Here's good luck." He half emptied his mug at a draught. "Well, what's the news? Anything happened since I was last here?"

"I don't know that there's a lot of news, sir. Things go on

much the same, you know. Quiet—very quiet." Stephen Paternoster shook his grizzled head slowly. "No. I can't say there's a lot of news. There's a new house up the lane been built since you was here."

"Where?"

"Up by the Priory ruins. London gentleman like yourself bought all that bit of ground what—two year ago it would be. Built himself a nice little house up there, he has, sir. You'll like it."

"What—you mean actually by the ruins?"

"That's right, sir. Where that tumbledown old barn used to be. Matter of fact he's built on to it. Interested in them old things, he is. A nice gentleman—Mr. Baldock—often calls in here for a glass and a chat."

Hugh Merrow frowned. The thought of a new-built house cheek by jowl with the grey stone walls of ruined Wilford Priory was not a pleasing one. But he answered casually:

"I must walk up and have a look at it presently. And what's your news, Stephen? Both the girls all right?"

"Yes, sir. Only got Evie with me now though. Milly—you remember Milly—"

"Indeed I do. A damned fine cook she was too. Going to marry a policeman, wasn't she?"

"That's right, sir. Jim Claxton over at Blymouth. But she lost him." Paternoster spoke lugubriously. "Lost him within the year. Pneumonia. Very sad it was, sir."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Merrow said. "What's she doing now?"

"She's a cook over at the Beach Hotel at Shinglemouth. Doing very well."

"I should think she would. And Eve?"

"She's going to get married too. Young Ling, the keeper."

"That's bad luck for you, Stephen. You'll be lonely."

The old fellow gazed steadily at his mug for some moments. Then: "That's a fact, Mr. Merrow," he said sadly. "And—as a matter of fact, sir—I'm thinking of packing up."

"What!" Merrow exclaimed. "Stephen, you don't mean you are going to leave the Black Boy?"

"Well, I've all but made up my mind to it."

"But, Stephen—there have been Paternosters here for over a hundred years, you told me."

"You're right. My father, his father and his father before him. Now it's about time someone else took the old place over." He finished his drink and slammed the mug down in a defiant way.

Hugh Merrow was disturbed. The idea of the Black Boy

without old Stephen Paternoster was unthinkable. There was something behind this. He spoke in a sympathetic tone.

"What's the trouble, Stephen? Trade dropping off—or what?"

The old fellow closed his straight mouth tight and was silent for a while. Then, as though he had made a momentous decision, he looked up.

"The fact of the matter is, Mr. Merrow, the old Black Boy is behind the times and so am I. You're right: trade is dropping off, and I don't wonder. People stop here and have a drink and say isn't it a quaint old inn. But when it comes to staying, they want running water and cocktails and telephones and what not. So they goes on up to the George and they gets it. Marvellous how they've improved that old place, sir. You'd hardly know it. Swept out all the old rubbish, they have, got a lounge with wicker chairs and little tables where the two little bars used to be and a snack bar at the back with high stools and silver-plated fittings. And that's what people want to-day. The old ways don't pay, sir, and that's a fact."

Hugh Merrow was listening intently, and sadly, to the outburst. Behind it he could sense the heartbreak in Stephen Paternoster, for he knew the old man's pride in his inn, pride in owning the only Free House for many miles round and of the honest service he had always given to his customers, gentle or simple.

"'Tisn't as if I couldn't try," Paternoster went on after a moment. "I've got a bit put by. I could paint up the old place, redecorate and maybe I could make a lounge and a snack bar down here, but tell you the truth I haven't got the heart to do it. I'm not so young as I used to be and it isn't as if I'd got a son to come after me. I'm not saying that Milly wouldn't come back and help me if I asked her. But I can't ask her, sir. It 'ud be so dull for her. It isn't as if it was a busy house and I couldn't expect her to keep it on after I go. No. I've thought about it a lot, and Lintons of the Wilborough Brewery have been crazing me for two years to sell. I had young Mr. Linton over here again only this morning—and—well—I told him I'd let him have his answer to-morrow. I'd sleep on it—but I know what I'm going to do."

"What do Lintons want it for; they've got the George, haven't they?" Merrow put in sharply.

"Kill competition—even my competition—and like as not after a year or two they'd close the old place down."

Merrow ran a hand through his dark hair, frowning. If Lintons got hold of the place he knew what would happen. They would roughcast the front, sweep away the merry Black Boy

sign and replace it with one of their beastly green and yellow things that disfigured the country. "Ye Olde Black Boy" they'd call it and kill its character; turn it into a pub—it was like killing a soul. He was indignant. Nobody should have the right to destroy this lovely survivor of a past, more gentle age. Business was business, and Hugh Merrow knew something about business, but damn it all, there ought to be some decencies about it. You might as well buy a village church and turn it into "Ye Olde Alle Saints Cinema." In the heat of his indignation a mad idea was simmering.

"If it's not a rude question, Stephen, what's the Wilborough Brewery offering you?" he asked.

"Twenty five hundred for freehold and goodwill. Stock and fittings at valuation, same for any furniture they want to take over. Me to stay on rent free for a twelvemonth as tenant on the usual terms," Paternoster said bluntly.

"Two thousand five hundred," Merrow said as if to himself. "Stock and fittings, what, Stephen—two or three hundred?"

"If I can get that, sir," the old man grinned.

"Anyhow—do you reckon it a fair offer?"

"Yes: it's not a bad price, things as they are. I doubt I could do better."

"Um!" Hugh Merrow raised his mug and drained it. Then, abruptly he rose.

"I'm sorry, Stephen—damned sorry. But there it is. Something of the same sort has just happened to me. Funny tricks life plays you. I'll run the car into the yard and bring my luggage in."

"I'll give you a hand, sir. You'd like your old room, I expect. I'll tell Evie," Paternoster responded.

"Thank you, Stephen." Merrow went out of the inn with the mad idea that had simmered up in his mind taking more definite form.

He glanced up at the signboard before he climbed into his car, and it seemed to him that for the first time the black boy was not grinning, and there was sadness in the once merry white eyes.

He swore softly. "Don't make a damned fool of yourself," he said irritably. "You're acting like a sentimental schoolgirl."

But Hugh Merrow knew then, in his heart, despite this admonition, that he was going to make a damned fool of himself. He was going to buy the Black Boy Inn.

CHAPTER TWO

I

FOR nearly half of his thirty odd years of life Hugh Merrow had worked in the City. Straight from Harrow he had gone, as a matter of course, into the family firm of Merrow, Webb, and Copeland, Chartered Accountants, and from the day he had entered the office, a lad of eighteen, he had hated the life.

Not that he was a fool, nor incompetent; even dour, pernickety old Webb admitted that. Hugh had as keen a brain as his father had had, he often said; but the trouble with the boy was that he wouldn't give his mind to his profession.

The trouble with the boy really was that he loathed the City, he was miserable in airless offices and sunless streets and resentful of old Webb's constant disparaging criticism of his work and methods. Even when, in due course, Hugh became a partner in the firm, Webb continued to treat him like a child.

Hugh Merrow had modern ideas. John Webb's view of business was that what had been good enough for Hugh's dead father should be good enough for Hugh. He boasted that he mistrusted change, and complained that Hugh wanted to spoil and pamper the staff. There had been years of constant friction, and it had come to its inevitable end, but a few weeks before, in an almighty row over some quite trivial thing.

Both Hugh and old Webb had lost their tempers and Copeland, the dreary but immensely efficient third partner, had sided with Webb. And the end of it was that the two of them had offered to buy Hugh Merrow's share in the firm and Hugh had accepted.

He left with a fat cheque and a light heart but with no definite ideas for the future. All he wanted at the moment was to get away from the City, get away from business, travel for a bit. Out of that mood of rebellion crystallized the idea of finding a cottage in the country into which to shift his belongings from his pokey little flat in Westminster, enjoy the rest of the summer just messing about and doing nothing that he didn't want to do, then clear off in the autumn anywhere.

Impulsively that morning he had got into his car and headed for Suffolk; to the Black Boy at Wilford because of its happy memories, because it was a place as unlike the City and the affairs of Merrow, Webb, and Copeland, and as untinged with Business with a capital B as anything he could imagine.

Yet within half an hour of his arrival at the Black Boy the unpredictable hand of Fate had stretched out and clutched him and was dragging him back to business again.

Merrow told Paternoster that he was going to stroll down to the river to stretch his legs before dinner.

Old Paternoster said, "That's right, sir: give you an appetite like. What time would you like it: about seven?"

"That'll do fine, Stephen."

"I'll tell Evie," Paternoster said.

But Merrow was not going to stretch his legs; he had already surrendered to business and was going to hold a Board Meeting with himself in a place in which he knew he could think clearly and thrash out the matter undisturbed. But the Board Meeting had begun before he left the inn: his mind was buzzing with plans and schemes and dreams.

He took the winding lane that drops gently past the ruined Priory to the hump-backed bridge that spans the river Willet a hundred yards beyond. And for the first time he passed the grey ruins without glancing at them. He was not even conscious of Mr. Baldock's new-built house as he went by, head down bent, utterly absorbed in thought.

Romantic though he might be, Hugh Merrow was also a very practical man. He had decided an hour before that he was going to buy the inn if Stephen would sell, and he had faced the fact that maybe he would lose money on it. But a man must pay for his fancies, and thanks to his row with the firm he could afford to pay. Now the practical side of his mind was asserting itself. He was taking a realistic view of his sentimental scheme.

Yes, he might lose money, but how much? Two thousand five hundred, say three thousand for the property. Well, he had meant to go up to fifteen hundred for a cottage if he could have found one. That halved the cost and gave him a home in the country. Stock and fittings, say three hundred. Then immediate outlay on things he meant to do at once—call it seven hundred. Four thousand pounds. Another thousand for further improvements and advertising: Merrow had his definite ideas about advertising. Five thousand should see the job through. If things went well—that was another story. If they went badly he'd still have a very lovely house and big garden. Right, he'd chuck five thousand as a hostage to Fate. If he lost the whole damned lot he could still live very comfortably.

But he wasn't going to lose it.

Merrow crossed the bridge and gazed for a few moments at the lazy stream beneath him then climbed a stile and took a familiar path through the woods.

Beyond the bridge—Priors Bridge—the land rises sharply, and for nearly a mile Haverly Great Wood comes almost to the

river's edge. Merrow strolled slowly on for five minutes till he came to a little clearing where the Willet bends and runs under a high sandy bank.

It was a favourite spot of his; he had spent many a happy idle hour there. A kingfisher streaked from under the bank, a flash of vivid blue in the strong sunlight. A couple of solemn moorhens paddled upstream hunting the reeds on the farther side. Merrow found a shady patch of rough grass for a seat, and began to fill a pipe. It was cool and remote with the sweet aromatic smell of sun-warmed earth and growing things in the air.

Presently a heron flopped over the water meadows beyond and settled to its patient fishing close at hand, apparently as unconcerned with Hugh Merrow as he was with it.

For Merrow's mind was ranging into the future then. Though there were essential things to be settled immediately—matters of staff and wages, turnover, marketing—these were concrete facts in which Paternoster could instruct him. For the moment he was giving himself up to dreams. He was seeing the Black Boy as he meant to make it within a few months' time.

He must have it all ready by next Easter; that was when the tourist season began. Couldn't look to start earning real profits before then. Perhaps he'd have to run the first year at a loss. Well, he could afford it. The old things don't pay to-day, old Stephen had said to him, but by Gad he was going to show Stephen and the brewers, and the world for that matter, that they could.

But he must keep a sense of proportion. The bedrooms; there were only five letting rooms, at the moment—Merrow dreamed of ten and fifteen before long—they must be tackled carefully. He didn't mean to keep them as "antiques." He'd have a fixed basin with hot and cold water in each. And bathrooms, yes, that was a problem, he must have two at least to start with and more later. He pulled an envelope from his pocket and jotted down "? water supply." Then his mind reverted to the bedrooms.

All Stephen's furniture must go. He'd get comfortable and modern beds, decent carpets and curtains—that was another snag. He'd want advice about them. Something "country" but not "arty." If he didn't know exactly what he did want, he knew what he did not. But that was a woman's job.

He smiled to himself. His sister Joan could help him there: she had marvellous taste. But his sister Joan probably wouldn't. The news that he had cleared out of the family firm had caused consternation enough to his mother and sister in their most convenient home in Cheltenham. What they would say when

they heard he was going to run a pub—— The smile broadened and he made another note.

Upstairs, comfort and taste, that was the idea. Keep an old-world atmosphere but no old-world discomforts. Though the running water must wait, and the redecoration of the rooms, he could get some decent furniture into them in a week or two. One more note went down on the envelope.

But he must concentrate on more urgent things. Dress the shop window. He could do a bit of that before the holiday season got into full blast in August. That parlour. He'd have the red paper off the wall to start with. A local man could do that job. And yank out the nasty little grate. There was an open hearth behind it, he was certain. If he got a man on to it at once he ought to get a makeshift job of it done at least in three weeks. Merrow visualized a pleasant long room with an open hearth and timbered walls, just the place to appeal to the casual tourist dropping in for a drink.

Then the dining room. He meant to treat that rough too. Couldn't strip the walls there, but they might be distempered to carry on with. It would want new tables, cutlery and silver and glass, pictures and a decent plain carpet to replace the much-worn abomination of huge pink roses and sprawling leaves. That could be done quickly. He'd order the stuff in London to-morrow and send down some of the sporting prints that hung on the walls of his own flat.

These were the main things to be done at once. If he worked hard he could do a lot within a month and there were three weeks of July to go yet. More notes went down on the envelope: "Refrigerator," thank heavens the inn did have electric light. "Telephone." "Local man to distemper dining room and fix parlour." "Entrance. If oak floor polish and scrap linoleum. Then a new envelope came out and he scribbled on it "Catering."

Old Paternoster's food was simple and good. It suited him well enough but it lacked variety. Merrow meant to keep it simple and good but give it variety. He wrote "? Tradesmen. Nearest fishmonger. Fruit. ? Own garden produce. Cellar." That was another problem.

Stephen's beer was first class. His spirits the usual proprietary brands, but his wines were deplorable. Merrow added: "See Warner" to the notes, for Archie Warner was an old friend and a wine merchant. Archie would advise here. He wanted some good stuff: not expensive but honest. He was seeing a wine list, not a long one but with nothing on it to be ashamed of. Particularly he must get a decent light sherry. That would be a good advertisement for the house: your passing motorist

would remember it as he himself remembered the few inns where he had been given a decent sherry at a reasonable price. And everyone drank sherry nowadays.

That was the thing to do this season ; just concentrate on advertising—getting the house known and liked. Getting people to talk about it—quaint old oak beams, decent food, good drinks and not too expensive. Then they'd come back again next year. Wilford was not far from the coast and in the holiday season you must get hundreds of motorists from the seaside towns for what Paternoster called "chance trade." If he made the Black Boy sufficiently attractive he ought to have it full for three months in the year.

Then there would be Christmas and Easter to bring more custom, and shooting parties in winter and the local trade—he must ask Stephen about that. It was going to be a success, if—and there Merrow's mind went to another matter—if he learned the trade.

And that he meant to do, from the bottom upward. Stephen must teach him. He was going to learn the whole art and mystery of inn-keeping from A to Z, the dull routine parts of it as well as the more colourful side that had so much appealed to him for years.

Through the still air the notes of Wilford's clock striking seven brought Hugh Merrow out of his thoughts. He scrambled to his feet and half a dozen rabbits feeding close by scampered in alarm. A startled pheasant somewhere behind him cockled noisily, and he set off to hurry back to his dinner a happier man than he ever had been in his life.

3

Merrow stopped for a few minutes on the bridge to look at the ruined Priory. It was a view that he remembered well. That little cluster of irregular grey walls rising out of green meadow land had always struck him as sad in a way. The place looked so forgotten and lonely and immensely old.

The slanting rays of the evening sun fell on the great empty window at the west end of what had once been the monks' church and drew unsuspected colour from its mouldering stonework. Farther away the ragged walls of the Refectory made a background for grazing cattle. It was all supremely peaceful and English, like the Black Boy.

It was then that he noticed for the first time Mr. Baldock's house. It interested and pleased him. If there had to be a house there among those quietly sleeping walls this house did not offend.

He had expected a bigger place, but the house was very modest. A long low building, one wall of which was that of an ancient barn, it fitted into the picture admirably. Baldock had built of stone or at anyrate of some grey material. He must be a man of taste, Merrow thought with approval. But for a new, still rather raw drive he had constructed from the lane he had made little obvious change in the landscape.

Merrow had a glimpse of a garden beyond, part walled, part hedged. But there again Baldock had been considerate. He had not impinged upon the old footpath which wound across the meadow from the lane some way beyond the new drive.

There was a car standing by the drive gate where a man stood talking apparently to the occupant of the car. He would probably be Baldock, Merrow thought. He could not see him clearly for he was part hidden by the open door of the car. But he seemed to be elderly, with a distinct stoop, hatless and dressed in country fashion of loose tweed coat and baggy knickerbockers. Merrow continued on his way.

He passed the car a couple of minutes later, but he kept to the far side of the road and hurried by without looking up. But he heard a snatch of conversation.

The hatless man, whom he took to be Baldock, was saying in a soft smooth voice, "It doesn't sound a very good proposition to me, but I may be wrong."

His companion replied contemptuously, "It's got about as much chance as a horse with three legs."

Merrow passed out of earshot, but the phrase remained in his mind: about as much chance as a horse with three legs.

Some people might think that of his chances of success with the Black Boy Inn. But he didn't.

CHAPTER THREE

I

MERROW ate his evening meal alone and in critical mood. Not that he had any complaint to make of the food. Stephen had put up an ideal simple meal for a hot summer night. Cold lamb, and lovely lamb too, beautifully cooked: salad fresh from the garden, new potatoes, a great dish of green peas. A red currant and raspberry pie with lashings of cream and an honest cheddar cheese to finish with. There were bowls of cherries and raspberries on the sideboard too, but Merrow preferred the pie.

No, the food was all right, it was with the surroundings that

he quarrelled, and he laughed at himself as he did so, admitting that though he had eaten in that same room scores of times its shabby tastelessness had never fretted him before. But already he had come to regard the Black Boy as his inn though he had not yet mentioned a word of his mad scheme to Stephen.

There would have to be a big change here. The place must be refurnished. Except for the sideboard perhaps, that was a decent old Georgian thing. It wanted repair, but it was generous and useful. Merrow saw cold dishes standing upon it in days to come—rounds of beef, hams, cold salmon, game pies—yes, the sideboard should stay. But the walls must be distempered at once. Something light—a creamy white if it would cover the bilious green of the existing paper. To the surprise of Eve Paternoster, who stood waiting by the door to serve the next course, Merrow rose to prod the wall. The paper was stretched on canvas apparently. Merrow wondered how distemper would affect that.

"Aren't you going to have any cheese, Mr. Merrow?" Eve asked.

"Yes, you can bring it now, Eve, I was only just looking at something," he answered, and began to study the mantelpiece.

It was an abomination, yet it had never before offended him so grossly. Of some polished red stone that looked like petrified brawn, it supported a clock made of darker brawn. The clock was flanked by two bronze warriors on rearing horses, and it showed, permanently, the time to be a quarter past three. Above the chimneypiece hung a large photogravure of a sullen-looking child suggestive of Little Lord Fauntleroy defying a fierce Roundhead soldier who, according to the title, was asking "Where is your Father?"

Something drastic would have to be done about this. Again Merrow laughed at himself for the different point of view that had so swiftly come upon him, and he found himself wondering if the brawn would take paint.

Eve Paternoster's voice from the door interrupted his thoughts. She was ushering in a newcomer. He heard her saying, "This way, miss, please. Would you like to sit by the window?" and a low, strained, cultured voice answered, "Thank you: no—no—not by the window. I think I'll sit here," and she went to a little table in the corner of the room.

Merrow thought of her instantly as his first customer and he was determined to study her; see if she were dissatisfied with anything and note if she asked for anything the inn—his inn—could not but should supply. He glanced across the room at her, and she reminded him of somebody, but who at the moment he did not worry to place.

She was slim and dark and very well dressed; a well-to-do customer, probably with definite restaurant tastes. This was going to be interesting. He watched her scanning the menu Eve offered.

She seemed uncertain. Eve said, "The cold lamb's ever so nice, miss, but if you'd rather something hot we could do you a cutlet."

The woman answered in a low monotone,

"Yes, yes. I'm sure the lamb's lovely, but I—I don't feel very hungry. It's the heat, I think. Have you any soup?"

"I can get you some, miss."

"If you would, please. That and some of that fruit I see. That will be all I want, thank you."

Eve looked disappointed and Merrow sympathised with her. Here was an excellent meal offered to her and the woman preferred soup. Merrow felt with Eve that it was a slight on the house. Eve was moving to the door when the woman spoke again,

"Would you get me a whisky and soda—a large one, please," she said.

"Large whisky and soda," Eve repeated with mild reproof in her tones, and again Merrow sympathised. A damned curious customer this.

From beneath frowning brows he eyed her more intently. She must be a "chance," he thought, for she wore a hat and carried a handbag as though she had just come in from her car. But Eve's voice in the distance, "Double Scotch and soda number four" as she passed the order to her father told him that he was wrong. The woman was staying in the house. But there was certainly something unusual about her. For the moment Merrow thought that she really must be ill, for she sat staring at the table, her face set in an expression almost of despair. Her fingers moved restlessly from time to time, unconsciously as though she were lost in thought.

Her face was more interesting than beautiful, but attractive, undeniably attractive even in its dull immobility. And Merrow read tragedy in the face, the tragedy of one stunned by some great loss, he thought. He found himself feeling terribly sorry, for her nerves were clearly strained to breaking point. Yet she recovered her control when Eve returned with the drink on a tray. She flashed a very charming smile at the girl and thanked her, but she took the drink down almost neat, and Merrow felt ashamed of his scrutiny, for he had no right to intrude upon this woman's distress.

Hurriedly he finished his meal and bade Eve bring his coffee out to the porch, and then he admitted to himself that his first

attempt at studying the idiosyncracies of his customers had not been a success.

2

He saw the woman again twenty minutes later. He had heard her asking Eve if there were not the ruins of an old abbey somewhere nearby, and her voice sounded less strained.

Eve directed her and said she could walk there easily in ten minutes, and she answered pleasantly that she felt better for her dinner and she thought that a little walk before bedtime might do her good. She passed Merrow sitting in the porch and he saw her turn to the left up the Priory Lane, walking purposefully.

Presently he went inside and looked at the Visitors' Book. Beneath his own name he read, in thick bold script, "Helen West" and her place of residence "Chelsea." Old Paternoster came out of the parlour at the moment and Merrow said, "I see I'm not the only visitor, Stephen."

Paternoster screwed up his face in an expression of disapproval.

"I could do without her, sir," he said. "She'd do better up at the George."

"Why, what's the matter with her?" Merrow was surprised at the old man's outburst.

"Sort of customer the Black Boy doesn't want, Mr. Merrow," he said confidentially. "A large Scotch and soda when she comes, because she's thirsty: another up to her room because she's got a headache, then another in the dining room and nothing to eat with it. It's bad enough when it's a man but it's worse when it's a woman, and worse still when it's a lady. You get 'em sometimes, sir, but they don't do the house any good."

"But you're not suggesting she was tight, Stephen?"

"No, sir, that sort don't get tight; you could refuse to serve 'em if they did. But I don't like 'em, if they do up at the George."

Paternoster went into his little bar at the back of the hall and Merrow wandered up to his room, interested and a little amused.

He wondered what the old boy would think of a London Cocktail Bar. And the George did rankle in the old man's mind.

But the incident had made Merrow realise that one of the unpleasant things of innkeeping would be the undesirable customer, and somehow he had never associated the Black Boy with undesirables.

But he soon forgot about Helen West and Stephen's disapproval, for he was sorting out his scribbled notes of the afternoon, intent on getting them into proper order, for he meant to tackle

Paternoster before he went to bed, and for all his professed dislike of business Hugh Merrow was at heart a very business-like man.

It was getting on for closing time when he came downstairs. A murmur of laughter and conversation pervaded the inn. Broad Suffolk voices sounded from the tap-room at the back, and a more subdued talk from the parlour. Merrow knew the ways of the Black Boy. Presently when the customers had gone, Paternoster himself would see that the tap-room door in the yard was locked, then Tom Self the Potman who served the tap would come along and collect the dirty glasses from the parlour, clear the ash trays and tidy up a bit, and while he was washing up Stephen would go into the little bar at the back of the hall and count the evening's takings. When that job was finished was the time to get him for a chat and a drink. Smoking in the porch, watching the long twilight fading into a velvety summer night, Merrow waited until he heard the chinking of coins cease and the slam of the door of Paternoster's ancient safe.

There was a tiny snuggerly behind the bar. It was Paternoster's office and to it only his intimates were ever invited. Merrow crossed the hall and called to the old man,

"Going to join me in a nightcap, Stephen?" he said.

"Very kind of you, Mr. Merrow. Come along in," Stephen responded, opening the door. "Hope you're enjoying yourself. Now what can I get you?"

Merrow waited until the drinks were served with a sudden sinking feeling in his heart. Suppose Stephen wouldn't sell.

"Here's your very good health, sir," the old man said.

"Thank you, Stephen." They drank. Then: "I've been thinking a lot about what you told me this afternoon," Merrow went on. "I hate to think of the old Black Boy as a brewer's house."

"So do I, sir. But there it is." Paternoster shook his head and gazed glumly at the table.

"Wouldn't rather sell it to me and keep it a Free House, would you?" Merrow blurted out.

"Sell it to you, Mr. Merrow!" The old fellow's face expressed bewilderment. Then he laughed. "That's a good 'un. I can't see you serving pints of mild in the tap on a Saturday night."

"But I'm serious, Stephen."

"Serious? What 'ud you do with it?"

"Run it, Stephen."

"But you're a gentleman."

"That's as it may be, but I'm a business man."

"But look here, Mr. Merrow; there's hardly a living in it

for me or I wouldn't be selling. And as for you—you'll excuse me, sir, but I wouldn't give you a six month. You don't know anything about the trade to start with——"

"You could teach me a lot in a year."

"Me?"

"I'll buy the place from you to-morrow on the same terms Linton's have offered you. You'll be staying on for a year and if you'll teach me I'll undertake to learn enough in that time to run the place and make it pay."

"It couldn't be done, sir, not unless you was to spend about another two thousand modernizing the old place. No one could do it."

"I'm prepared to spend another two thousand or three in not modernizing the old place, Stephen."

Old Paternoster's eyes fixed shrewdly on Merrow.

"What have you got in the back of your mind, sir?" he demanded.

"I'll tell you, Stephen."

3

Eve Paternoster came into the snugery while Merrow was talking. "I'm home, Dad," she announced.

Paternoster hardly looked up.

"All right, Evie," he said. "I'm just talking a bit of business with Mr. Merrow. I'll be along for my supper soon. You needn't wait up."

Old Paternoster replied mechanically. His mind intent upon what Merrow had been saying, for Hugh Merrow was drawing what to him was a very attractive picture; a picture of the old Black Boy flourishing once more, and rivalling the George, and, what meant a lot to Stephen Paternoster, remaining a Free House.

Merrow had stressed that point. He knew the old man's pride in his house and his reluctance to see "the brewers get hold of it." And Merrow was wise enough not to elaborate his schemes for restoring the inn. He called it re-decoration and re-furnishing, and Stephen Paternoster nodded approval. But when Merrow finished he spoke very frankly.

"It all sounds very nice, Mr. Merrow," he said. "And I don't say it couldn't be done, but there's more than hot water pipes in the bedrooms and new paper on the dining room walls in the running of a house like this."

"I know there is," Merrow agreed. "I've got to learn just as I should have to learn any business. But I'm damned sure you could teach me a lot in a year."

Paternoster rose without replying and refilled the glasses.

"Well, I'll give you your first lesson now," he said bluntly, and went across to his ancient safe. "The first thing you do when you go to buy a house, Mr. Merrow, is to see the books. That don't seem to have occurred to you." He opened the safe and looked among a pile of papers. "Now then, before we do any more talking I want you to have a look at this. Don't take my word for it, you satisfy yourself. Here's the figures the Auditor got out for Linton's. There's the books to check them by if you want to. No, you can't look through those figures in a minute, take 'em up to your room, sir, and go through the lot quiet. Then you'll know what you're buying."

"You mean, Stephen, that if I'm satisfied you'll sell?" Merrow asked eagerly.

Old Paternoster slammed the safe door to.

"I'll sleep on it, Mr. Merrow," he said definitely. "And I'd thank you to go through those figures and sleep on it too. That's all I'll say to-night. Now, sir," he picked up his glass, "whatever we both may decide here's my thanks to you for your feelings about the old Black Boy." With true dignity the old fellow bowed, drained his glass, then added, "I'm going along to get a bit of supper now, sir. I wish you good-night," and Hugh Merrow knew that he was being dismissed.

It did not take him long, up in his room, to get a clear idea of the financial position of the Black Boy. Trade had been falling off badly in the past few years, and Stephen could have got but the barest of livings out of the old inn. But Merrow was not dismayed. He spent an hour getting out some estimates of his own and he found it an absorbing occupation. Stephen must check them, of course—they concerned mostly wages and running expenses—but if they were anywhere nearly correct, Merrow saw no reason to regret his impulsive decision.

He turned in just before one, excited and happy. He was still asleep when Eve brought him his tea at eight. Eve said something about the lady in number four not having come home last night, but that made little impression on his mind.

He asked, "Is your father about?" and Eve replied that he was, and that he seemed worried, which Hugh Merrow took to mean that he was worrying about the sale of the inn. It would be a blow to the old man to give up the Black Boy after so many years' association with the place, no matter to whom he sold it.

"Tell him I'd like a word with him before I have breakfast," Merrow said cheerily.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

STEPHEN PATERNOSTER agreed to sell the Black Boy Inn at Wilford to Hugh Merrow at a quarter to nine that morning. He seemed rather subdued when he announced his decision.

"If you're satisfied, I am, Mr. Merrow," he said. "It's a deal. And I'm sure I wish you well of your bargain and I'll do all I can to help you."

They talked for a few minutes about lawyers and valuers, but Merrow knew that the old man was worried, and he checked his impulse to ask if there were a local man who could deal with the stripping of the parlour walls and distempering the dining room, at once. Better leave that for a day or two and let Stephen get used to the idea that the house was no longer his before he began alterations.

He told him that he would be going up to London that morning to see his own solicitor and "do some odd jobs," adding that he would be sending a few things down and that he hoped to be back in a couple of days.

Paternoster said, "Very good, sir," and Merrow went in to his breakfast all unconscious of the fact that he had been receiving a lesson in one of the finer points of innkeeping.

Old Stephen Paternoster was not worried about the sale of the inn. He was well content that it should be going into Merrow's hands, and anxious and eager to teach him all he knew of the trade. What was worrying him was that Helen West, "the lady in number four," was missing, and that meant that if he didn't hear something soon he ought to notify the police, and that might mean a deal of bother. But Stephen Paternoster came of a line of innkeepers and it was instinct with him that scandal or death or illness in the house were matters to be kept from the knowledge of the customers so far as possible. And Mr. Merrow was still a customer.

Actually Paternoster had sent Tom, the potman, for the local constable when Merrow left an hour later. But he said nothing of it. He even joked.

"Hope you'll find I've looked after the Black Boy properly when you come back," he laughed. "If not you'll have to put me right, sir," and Merrow answered in the same light vein, his mind too intently occupied with his own affairs to give any thought to "the lady in number four."

He had a busy day ahead of him. It was not until he sat in the smoking room of his club that evening that she came to

his mind again. He was waiting for Archie Warner. He had telephoned him to come and dine with him and advise him about stocking a cellar. Warner was late, and looking through an evening paper Merrow saw the face of "Helen West."

At once he knew of whom she had reminded him for the caption beneath the picture read, "Miss Janet Warren." Janet Warren was a portrait painter who had been a good deal in the news in recent months, for she had done portraits of one or two well-known people which had been highly praised by the critics. Also, Merrow remembered, she had had a lot of publicity early in the year when her engagement to the Marquis of Iken's son, Lord Reginald Sudbourne, had been announced. Merrow had known Reggie Sudbourne as a small boy at Harrow.

A bald headline above the picture caught his eyes and read: "Tragic Death of Well-Known Artist: Janet Warren found Dead."

2

That shocked him. In a flash there came to his mind the woman's strained, despairing expression as he had seen it just twenty-four hours ago. He remembered Eve Paternoster's bald statement that the lady in number four had not come home. He began to read the story that accompanied the picture.

Under a Wilborough date line the paper's local correspondent wrote that the body of a woman found drowned in the River Willet at Wilford that morning had been identified as that of Miss Janet Warren, the well-known portrait painter. She had arrived on the previous evening at a Wilford inn and had booked a room for the night. After dinner she had gone for a walk but had not returned to the inn. The police had been informed and a search organised. Later the body had been found by Henry Ling, a gamekeeper, caught in the reeds by the river bank. It was not known how Miss Warren had come by her death, but the river bank near the place where her body was found was steep in places and a stranger walking there in the dark might easily slip and fall in.

There was a brief reference to her engagement and the statement that Lord Reginald Sudbourne was expected to be returning shortly from Buenos Ayres, where he was an attaché at the British Embassy. Then followed the best part of a column of obituary and appreciation of Janet Warren's work.

Merrow dropped the paper and sat thinking for a while. This was a bad business and it looked unpleasantly like suicide to him—the woman's strange behaviour, her heavy drinking, the odds were that there was a nasty scandal coming out of this.

Damned bad luck for her family and a tragedy for Reggie Sudbourne.

Oh, a hell of a business! and poor old Paternoster would take it hard too. It seemed almost as if he'd sensed trouble. And not a very propitious beginning to his own venture with the Black Boy, Merrow shrugged his shoulders. The pub looked like getting plenty of publicity in the next day or two, but not of the kind of which he had visualised. A sad and deplorable affair all round.

He caught sight of Archie Warner coming in at the door and he rose. Instinctively Hugh Merrow gave his first exhibition of inn-craft. It wouldn't be good business to broadcast the bad news about "his" inn to Warner at once. He greeted him with natural cheeriness.

"Oh there you are, Archie. Come in; sit down and have an aperitif," he said.

Warner dropped into a chair and said he'd like a glass of dry sherry.

"I want to talk to you about sherry," Merrow said when he had ordered drinks.

"Good. What's the cellar you talk about stocking? Have you bought yourself a country house or what, Hugh?"

"Yes. I'm buying a country house," Merrow answered. "I'm buying a country pub, as a matter of fact, and I want it to have a cellar of good honest wine at a reasonable price."

Archie Warner laughed. He had not taken Merrow seriously.

"It will be unique among country pubs, old boy, if you offer wine fit to drink at a reasonable price," he said. "But seriously, what's the idea?"

"Just that, Archie. I'm going into the inn-keeping business."

3

Merrow made his first purchase for the Black Boy over dinner, and on club notepaper afterwards he and Warner drew up the inn's new wine list.

Archie Warner's advice was invaluable: he knew the public taste, and he suggested wines Merrow would never have thought of and vetoed some that he had wanted.

"You see, old boy, you're not choosing stuff for your own drinking; or I hope not," he said when Hugh was protesting against a sweet Sauterne Warner had suggested. "You'll find a lot of women like a sweet wine. If you give them this, it's a very sound wine, it'll taste better to them than the stuff they've had elsewhere and will cost them less. They'll remember that in your favour and come back again for more."

Merrow agreed and they had a long discussion about the port. There Warner advocated a smaller quantity but a better quality of vintage wine.

"You'll find," he said, "any fellow who's prepared to pay for a bottle of vintage port isn't going to haggle over a bob or two. Have a bit of the best to offer, and if you don't sell it, it'll never be cheaper than it is to-day, and I'll buy it back from you in a year or two at a profit. Good port's an investment if your cellar's all right. I can vouch for the wine but I can't guarantee the cellar, but I'll be coming down to see you from time to time and I'll give the corks a look over when I come."

It was grand fun, and Merrow was surprised when Archie Warner left that he had hardly once thought of and never mentioned the tragedy at Wilford.

Nor had he much occasion to think of it the next day. The morning papers had little more of it than had appeared in the evening's, and Merrow's day was a full one. He had his lawyer to see and his bank manager; he spent some hours enquiring about carpets and furniture and was alarmed to find how little he knew about these things and their prices. And the evening he spent in his flat packing up a few books for his own use and his sporting prints for the decoration of the Black Boy's dining room.

He was on the road again early the following morning, but even then his mind was too fully occupied with his schemes and plans for the inn to give more than a casual thought or two to Janet Warren's tragic death.

When, just after noon, the Black Boy's merry white eyes came into sight and he slowed to turn into the inn yard, for a few moments he could not understand what was happening. There were cars all over the place: in front of the inn, in the yard: a group of men were standing drinking beer in the porch and the whole place was alive with bustle and activity and chattering voices.

Then he caught the word "inquest," and he knew.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

MERROW's first reaction to all this noise and bustle was one of annoyance.

He had come back to the Black Boy absorbed in his own affairs and eager to get on with his schemes at once. He had been looking forward to a quiet lunch, a long talk with old

Stephen afterwards, and then to make a start in the cellar ; see that bins were ready for the first of the wine Archie Warner had promised to send off the previous day.

There was the local man to deal with the parlour and the dining room to be found too. Merrow wanted to get him to work immediately. And there were—oh, a dozen other little matters he wanted to deal with.

But now, with the place all upset like this, it would probably be days before he could make a start. Hugh Merrow was only human. He was sorry that a young and brilliant woman had come to a tragic and untimely death, but, damn it all, he did wish that that tragedy had not chosen to centre itself about the Black Boy at this time. He went in search of Paternoster.

The old man was in his bar, working like a slave, serving drinks, answering questions, giving orders with a cool efficiency that commanded Merrow's respect.

Stephen motioned Merrow into the sacred little snugger, served him with the drink for which he asked, and continued to do half a dozen things at once. Presently, in a momentary lull he made his first comment.

"Here's a nice how do you do, Mr. Merrow," he said. "You've seen it in the papers, I suppose."

Merrow nodded. "But what's actually happening?" he asked.

"Inquest, down at the Village Hall. Half-past one." Stephen broke off to draw two pints for the dining room, demanded by a harassed-looking country girl who evidently had been called in to help. "All want their lunch at once. You never saw such a to do."

"Who are they, Stephen?"

"Press gentlemen, most of them. Nice gentlemen but they've been fair crazing me with their questions and their photographs. Same down at the George. They're full up."

"But why all this excitement?"

"Don't ask me, sir. I'd have been happy enough without it. Just sensation, that's all it is. Of course they're all sure the poor woman drowned herself."

Merrow asked sharply. "Do you think so, Stephen?"

"I don't know anything about it, sir. You can hear all sorts of things. All I know is she came here and booked a room like anyone has a right to do. And she wasn't drunk when she was in this house or I wouldn't have served her. That's all I know and that's all I'm going to say."

Merrow read a wealth of implication in that blunt statement, and he suppressed a natural desire to ask for further information then, and Stephen did not volunteer it.

"I don't know what you'll do about lunch, sir," old Pater-

noster went on apologetically. "Me and Evie got to go to the inquest and there won't be much left when that lot's finished." He nodded towards the dining room, from which a babel of conversation drifted. "I'm going to have a bit of bread and cheese here. You'd better do the same—You'll be coming to the inquest, I suppose, sir?"

Merrow had not intended to do so, but he sensed that old Paternoster hoped that he would, and he answered at once, "Of course, Stephen. Everything that concerns the Black Boy concerns me now."

"Glad you feel that way about it, Mr. Merrow. I don't see why there should be any trouble, but a thing like this don't do a house any good, and I thank God I've never had anything like it happen here in all the years I've held the licence."

And then, to Hugh Merrow's surprise he appeared to dismiss the matter from his mind.

"Hope you found everything all right up in London, sir," he said.

"Quite. No snags, Stephen. I've put the business in hand."

"Glad to hear that, sir. You'll be making a start with doing up the old place soon then." And for the next half-hour at intervals of serving drinks, dealing with bills and answering numberless questions Stephen Paternoster discussed Merrow's plans as though the tragedy of Janet Warren had no concern whatever with the Black Boy inn. Old Stephen was wonderful.

2

Merrow walked the long half-mile of winding leafy road into Wilford village alone. Paternoster had gone on with Eve some little time before. The Black Boy seemed eerily silent and deserted when Merrow left it in charge of Tom Self and the harassed country girl who had been helping as waitress.

He found the Village Hall, half-way down Wilford's straggling street. Little knots of gossiping idlers stood among the swarm of motor cars outside, talking in subdued voices. They stared at him in undisguised curiosity as he entered the place.

Merrow was late. The Jurymen were being sworn when he pushed his way in at the back. They were a solemn looking group of farmers and tradesmen, very self-conscious, a little nervous and mildly self-important. The big room was bright with summer sunshine streaming in. More than half its floor was divided by a row of benches, beyond which sat the Coroner and his clerk, the Jury, the Press and those concerned with the enquiry. The smaller part, where Merrow stood, was crowded with curious villagers.

To Merrow, but for Stephen and Eve, all were strangers. He regarded the grave faces beyond the barrier with a keen interest, particularly those of the occupants of the row of chairs reserved for witnesses.

Ling the gamekeeper, who was Eve Paternoster's young man, was easy to pick out, and after a few moments he recognised, among a group of elderly men, whom he put down as doctors or lawyers, the man he believed to be Baldock.

There was a woman, with chestnut red hair, whom he remembered to have seen coming out of the dining room at the Black Boy. Her face attracted him. It was sad of expression and very serious. She was youngish, certainly not more than thirty, but despite her gravity she had an alertness of manner that suggested an active brain.

From time to time she spoke to a pedantic-looking, grey-haired man by her side; impulsively, as though some new idea had come to her mind upon which she must comment. Her companion listened to her with attention; sometimes nodding, sometimes shaking his head as he replied.

She, Merrow thought, must be a relative, a sister of the dead woman perhaps. But his vagrant surmises were interrupted by the Coroner, who began his opening address to the Jury.

He was a man of middle age, lean and strong featured. He spoke with the complete assurance of one who was used to being obeyed, yet there was a sympathy and understanding in his voice that made an immediate appeal to Merrow. There was no pomposity about him. He treated the obviously nervous Jurymen as though they were a team of which he was captain. Between them he suggested they had a sad but very important duty to perform. A young and accomplished lady had come to an untimely death in their midst. Theirs was the task of discovering as best they could from the evidence about to be presented to them how she came to that death.

Briefly he outlined the broader facts then made his points. There were some unusual incidents connected with the unhappy affair which, the Coroner said, doubtless would arouse speculation and surmise in their minds.

"He would be a very stupid man in whose mind such doubts and questionings did not arise," he said frankly. "They are in my own mind, but I am here, as you are here, Gentlemen, to dispel doubt with fact so far as we can do so. In due course you will deliver your verdict, but in deciding upon that verdict you must be influenced only by the sworn evidence brought before you, and in no way by your own surmises of what might have been or could have been, or your personal prejudices, feelings or judgments. You have sworn to deliver your verdict upon

the evidence and the evidence only. If you are in any doubt or perplexity about any point of that evidence I will do my best to make the matter clearer for you, and I am confident that you will perform your duty honestly and conscientiously."

3

Constable Hawes, the local policeman, then gave formal evidence of being informed by Paternoster that a visitor at the Black Boy was missing, of the action he had taken in the matter, and Stephen Paternoster was called.

He had seen the body of the dead woman and he identified her as Helen West, a lady who had come to the Black Boy shortly before seven in the evening two days before and had booked a room for the night. He had summoned his daughter Eve to show the lady to her room and he had not spoken to her after that.

The Foreman of the Jury, whom Merrow was to know later as Bob Ketton, queried the name Helen West.

"That point will be made clear shortly," the Coroner said, and turned again to Stephen.

"Now, Mr. Paternoster," he said quietly, "will you tell us in a little more detail what conversation you had with the lady. Did she, for instance, give any particular reason for coming to the Black Boy?"

Old Paternoster scratched his grizzled head.

"Why, no, sir. I can't say that she did," he replied after a few moment's thought. "She did mention she was on her way to the sea and she spoke of finding the weather very trying and being tired and thinking she wouldn't go any further that evening if we could put her up. That's all I remember, sir."

"Did she seem very tired, or ill in any way?"

"Tired, yes, sir, and sort of nervous, I'd put it. Spoke in a jerky kind of way. But not ill, sir, no, not ill."

"There was nothing about her behaviour that you could describe as in any way unusual?"

"Nothing at all, sir—no, no more unusual than lots of other customers that come to the house." Merrow smiled faintly. Old Stephen was trying to head off questions about her drinks and he was succeeding.

"At what time did Miss Warren leave the Black Boy?"

"About half-past eight, sir. I heard her talking to my daughter in the hall and saw her go out."

"And when did you discover that she had not returned?"

"My daughter told me, about eight. She'd been up to take the lady's early tea and found she hadn't slept in her room."

"Did you do anything about it? Notify the police or make any enquiries?"

"No, sir, not at once. It's difficult to know what the right thing is to do in a case like that. I've had visitors before that didn't come back. I mean sometimes they stay out with friends, or if they're motoring they have a breakdown. You can't tell sir, and we're not on the telephone, so they couldn't ring up. I gave it till ten o'clock and when the lady hadn't come home to breakfast I sent down to Mr. Hawes. You see, sir," Paternoster added in a worried voice, "you've got to think of your visitors—what would they think if you went and told the police and they'd just been staying at a friend's house or had a breakdown, like I said?"

"I see the difficulty, Mr. Paternoster." The Coroner nodded. "You had no reason to believe that she had not returned in the usual way?"

"None, sir. It was late, just on twelve before I locked the front door and I naturally thought she was in and gone to bed long before. If anyone comes back after the door's locked there's a bell."

A few trivial questions followed and then Doctor Luke Danvers was called. He was the elderly companion of the chestnut-haired woman.

He gave a Chelsea address and said that he had viewed the body of the deceased woman.

"And you could identify it?" the Coroner asked.

"I could, sir. It was the body of Janet Helen Warren, an artist, of 16 Argyll Studios, Chelsea."

"You knew Miss Warren well, I understand."

"I have been her medical attendant for some seven years past and I have been happy to count myself an intimate friend of hers."

"When did you last see Miss Warren alive?"

"Four days ago. I had tea with her at her studio."

"It was not a professional call?"

"Oh, dear me, no. I went in fact to see a picture she had recently finished."

"But I understand she consulted you about her health."

"To be accurate, no. We discussed her health, but it was I who first mentioned the matter. I thought she was not looking well and asked her about it. She told me that she was tired and sleeping badly, and attributed these facts to the heat. In the course of conversation I learned from her that she was a good deal worried because she had not been satisfied with her work recently. She had a number of commissions which she wished to complete before she was married—the wedding was to take

place in the early autumn—and she said she was getting badly behind hand with her work, and that worried her too. She did not ask for advice, but I gave it. I suggested a short but complete rest until the weather became cooler.”

“ Did she agree to accept your advice ? ”

“ She neither agreed nor disagreed. She made light of her condition and said it was only temporary, and that she would feel better when it became cooler.”

“ Will you tell us, Doctor Danvers : were you satisfied that her condition was as—as unimportant as she professed ? ”

The doctor hesitated for a few moments.

“ Yes,” he said at length. “ I was certainly not concerned. Miss Warren was temperamental—she possessed what is loosely known as the Artistic Temperament, in a high degree. She was always given to feverish spurts of work with a corresponding reaction. In those periods of reaction she was apt to be unduly depressed.”

“ What was her normal state of health ? ”

“ Extremely good. There was nothing organically wrong with her at all.”

“ You would not describe her as neurotic ? ”

“ Certainly not.”

“ I have to put this question, Doctor Danvers ; have you any reason to think that Miss Warren’s temperament was one that would tend, in some mood of depression, to make her take her own life ? ”

The doctor bristled.

“ Certainly not, sir. The lady so far as I know was perfectly happy, and looking forward to an even happier future. She was devoted to her work and received much and just appreciation of it. This temperament of which I have spoken must not be misinterpreted. There was nothing about it to suggest in any way suicidal tendencies. I cannot be more definite than that.”

4

Henry Ling came next. He told of finding the body. Ling was a wiry, loose-limbed young man with steady, far-seeing eyes.

He spoke slowly and deliberately. He was under-keeper to Captain Wilfred Sutton of Haverly House, he said, and he had received a message about half-past eleven on the day in question from the local constable saying that a lady from the Black Boy was missing, and asking him to make a search of Haverly Wood and the river bank because she’d last been seen, the night before, going in that direction. He immediately proceeded to make the

search, and about twelve o'clock he had seen a woman's body entangled in the reeds on the Wilford Priory side of the river about half a mile below Prior's Bridge. He had got across the river and pulled the body on to the bank.

Being satisfied that the woman was dead he had hurried to Mr. Baldock's house to telephone and to get assistance. Mr. Baldock and his gardener, Ernest Cummings, had returned with him, and presently Constable Hawes and Doctor Fenn arrived. The body was that of the woman upon whom the inquest was being held.

The Coroner did not interrupt him, but when he had finished he began to put questions.

"The place where you found the body: was it, do you think, one in which this lady might accidentally have fallen in?" he asked.

"No, sir, there's a bed of reeds by the bank there," Ling replied.

"How would you explain the body being there?"

"It 'ud have drifted down from higher up. There's an eddy there, sir, and a backwater. You're always finding things thrown up there."

"You know the river and its currents well?"

"Fairly well, sir."

"From your knowledge, could you suggest whereabouts the unfortunate lady did fall into the river?"

"Most anywhere below Prior's Bridge, sir. Not above. There was a fair stream running and a fair depth of water for summer-time."

"Have you any opinion from which side she might have fallen?"

"There's high banks in places on both sides. She must have fell off one of them."

"Or possibly from the Prior's Bridge itself?"

That seemed a new idea to Ling. He considered it for a few moments then agreed. "Yes, that 'ud be all right," he said. "I never thought of that."

"Did you make a search along both banks to see if you could find any signs of displacement or anything to suggest where the lady could have fallen in?"

"I did sir, but I didn't find anything. And anyhow the cattle do muck up the banks so in the Priory meadows it 'ud be hard to tell."

"Now, Mr. Ling," the Coroner said, "it is important for us to know as accurately as we can, how long the body had been in the reeds when you found it. When were you last at that particular spot—before you found the body, I mean?"

"I passed by there about half-past nine on the Tuesday night, the night the lady was missing."

"And you are satisfied that the body was not there then?"

"I'd have seen it if it had been, sir. It was quite light."

"I think you'd better tell the Jury why you were there."

Ling grinned faintly.

"There's been a lot of rabbit snares set down that way lately," he said. "I was watching to find out who set them."

"And did you?"

"No, sir."

"Just tell us what you were doing between say eight and eleven that evening."

"Well, sir, I went down to Haverly Great Wood soon after eight and had a poke round. I lay up quiet in one or two places hoping to catch whoever it was that come snaring. About half-past nine I come down the river bank to see if any more snares had been set there, and I hid there for about ten minutes, then I went up back through the woods to one or two places and about a quarter to ten I come back to Priory Lane, near the bridge, than walked along to the Black Boy, where my young lady lives."

"Yes?"

"I was talking to her till just after eleven. Then I went back to the bridge and listened a bit, and there didn't seem to be no one about so I went home."

"Do you know if any snares were set that night?"

"There were some, sir."

"Now you tell us that you were in the neighbourhood of where this unfortunate lady met her death from soon after eight until a quarter past ten, and for a short time just after eleven."

"I was, sir."

"During that time did you hear any unusual sounds: any cry of alarm or cry for help. Any splashing of the water or anything to suggest that someone had fallen into the water?"

"No, sir, but there was someone about the woods round about nine o'clock."

That statement caused a mild sensation in the Hall.

"Why do you say that?" the Coroner asked.

"The birds was disturbed: you can always tell."

"Did that surprise you?"

"No, sir, I was expecting it."

A mild titter went through the Hall.

"But you heard no unusual sound afterwards?"

"No, sir; I reckon the chap must have saw me somehow or knew I was there and he pushed off."

"You didn't see anybody?"

"No, sir."

A Juryman asked if Ling was expecting anybody in particular to be about there and Ling said cryptically, "There's several as might have been, but I wouldn't like to name no names," and the Coroner intervened.

"Gentlemen," he said to the Jury, "Mr. Ling is quite right. It would be grossly unfair to name any person on vague suspicion only, for, as must be quite clear to you, that would be to brand a possibly innocent person as a poacher, but I can assure you that very full enquiries have been made to try to discover any person who was in the neighbourhood of the river between Prior's Bridge and the place where Miss Warren's body was found last Tuesday evening, and all who might throw any light upon the circumstances in which she met her death will be called before you. If there be any who have not been called, I say here and now, most seriously, that it is their bounden duty as honest citizens to come forward without fear and offer their evidence."

A little hush fell upon the crowded room, then the Coroner continued:

"One more question, Mr. Ling: when you found the body, did you find with it, or near it, a lady's handbag?"

"No, sir. Mr. Hawes asked me that question, and him and me have made a search up and down for it. There's lots of deep old holes in the river where it might have sunk if 'twas heavy, and we have dragged but we couldn't find it, though that don't mean it isn't there."

Then after one or two questions to clarify times and places, Ling sat down.

5

Eve Paternoster followed Ling. Her evidence was brief. She told of taking Janet Warren to her room and serving her at dinner. Asked whether the lady seemed ill or distressed in any way, Eve said she did "act rather funny."

The girl was obviously nervous, standing there in the crowded room with all eyes fixed upon her. She spoke in a subdued way and seldom raised her own eyes. She was a pretty girl, fair haired, rather plump, with a discontented face, and a reserved manner.

Her remark brought an instant question from the Coroner that caused her to flush as though she had been reproved.

"What exactly do you mean by 'rather funny,' Miss Paternoster?" he asked kindly enough.

"Well—I mean—she seemed sort of dreamy. Couldn't make

up her mind. Sad like. And she wouldn't eat her dinner. Said the heat had upset her. Only had some soup and some fruit."

"Did she tell you she felt ill?"

"Oh, no, sir. Only just about the heat. And she seemed ever so much better afterwards."

"When did you last see her, Miss Paternoster?"

"About half-past eight. She'd been up to her room and when she came down she called me and said she felt better and wanted to go for a walk, and wasn't there some old ruins somewhere near because she'd like to look at them."

"And what did you say?"

"I told her yes and how to get to the Priory, and she thanked me and said she thought she'd seen it marked on a map. And then she went out."

"And you never saw her again?"

"No, sir—at least I saw her out of the dining room side window walking down Priory Lane."

"Do you remember if she was carrying her handbag with her?"

"Yes, sir. It was a lovely bag. I'd noticed it on the table at dinner. Ever so nice, it was. She had it under her arm when she went out."

"And you say she seemed quite normal, not excited in any way?"

"She was quite all right, sir."

"Thank you, Miss Paternoster."

Eve's evidence was finished and Merrow found himself relieved that no question about the woman's drinks had been raised. He had seen her after Eve and he was satisfied that she was perfectly sober, and if the tale of those whiskies and sodas had been told in court it could only have left an unpleasant slur on the dead woman's name and upon that of the Black Boy."

He heard Doctor Fenn's name called.

The local doctor was a sporting-looking man of middle age: brisk and self assured.

He told of examining the body on the river bank and later of making an autopsy. Death, he said confidently, was due to asphyxiation by drowning.

Asked if he could say how long the body had been in the water, he replied:

"It is impossible to say accurately. But in my judgment not less than twelve hours."

"Were there any marks on the body to suggest that the unhappy woman was injured in any way before or when she fell into the water?" the Coroner asked.

Another noticeable hush fell on the Hall.

Doctor Fenn answered without hesitation.

"None, sir," he said. "Such bruises and abrasions as I found are entirely consistent with causes that might have occurred after the body reached the water."

"Are you in a position to say if there was anything to show if the deceased struggled after entering the water?"

"I am not. There was nothing definite. Nothing in her hands to show that she had clutched at anything, for instance."

"Is that usual in such cases?"

"It would depend to some extent," the doctor said thoughtfully, "upon whether the deceased was conscious when she fell in and upon whether or not she could swim."

"Was there anything to suggest that she was not conscious?"

"To suggest, yes, sir. I found the stomach practically empty. She could have taken no solid food for many hours previous to her death. In such circumstances—I can only put this as a suggestion—it might well be that the lady was overcome with what I will call for simplicity's sake a fainting fit. I think it possible that such was the case. Had she been a swimmer, a good swimmer, I should have expected that the sudden immersion might sufficiently have recovered her consciousness to make her, automatically I might put it, strike out and at least reach the bank. If, however, she was unable to swim, though she may have regained consciousness and indeed struggled in deep water, she was unable to save herself."

"Thank you, Doctor Fenn. I will try to establish the fact of the deceased's ability to swim later, but for the guidance of the Jury I would put one or two more questions to you. Have you any reason to believe that the deceased met her death by violence?"

"None."

"That she came to her death by her own volition. That means," the Coroner looked at the Jury, "that she took her own life."

"I have no evidence whatever to offer that could support that conjecture."

"Do you know that stretch of river below Prior's Bridge well?"

"I do. I have fished in it, bathed in it and rowed on it for twenty years past. I think I may say that I know it very well."

"Would you consider it dangerous—you understand what I mean by that?"

"Certainly. Not dangerous to a swimmer who knew the river. But there are one or two bad patches of weed in which it would not be difficult to become entangled. In this case it is quite possible that the deceased may have so become en-

tangled, though there is no evidence to show it. Some years ago a boy was drowned here in that manner. But all deep water is dangerous to those who fall in unexpectedly and in their clothes—swimmer or non-swimmer. And there is in the stretch of river in question generally some seven or eight feet of water. I hope that answers your question, Mr. Coroner.

"Thank you, Doctor Fenn."

CHAPTER SIX

I

SO FAR the whole of the evidence seemed to show that Janet Warren had come by her death accidentally. But Hugh Merrow was not satisfied. He could not banish from his mind the picture of the woman's face as he had seen it at dinner time on the Tuesday evening. If ever he had read tragedy in a face he had read it then: tragedy and despair and nerves frayed and tattered.

There was something hidden in her life of which he had had a momentary glimpse even though she might have hidden it from the rest of the world; of that he was convinced. He wondered what the next witness would have to say, for Mr. Edgar Baldock had been called, and the Coroner's first remark to him was "Mr. Baldock, so far as we have been able to ascertain, you were the last person to see Miss Warren alive."

Merrow was interested in Baldock. At close range he seemed a younger man than Merrow had at first thought. He could hardly be more than sixty, a small, sharp-featured man with sandy hair tinged with grey. He had pale, weak eyes, the eyes of a student. He wore thick-lensed glasses and his shoulders hunched in an odd way, giving the appearance of a permanent stoop. He spoke in a soft persuasive voice and appeared to be distressed by the tragic event.

He was dressed in the short black coat and striped trousers of the City man, and Merrow was not surprised to hear him describe himself as a retired Insurance Broker.

"Will you please tell the Jury in your own words the circumstances of your meeting with her last Tuesday evening," the Coroner continued.

Mr. Baldock cleared his throat, and made a faint bow of acknowledgment.

"I will very gladly do so, sir," he said. "A few minutes before nine last Tuesday evening I was sitting in my garden after dinner when I saw a lady, a stranger to me, following the footpath that leads from Priory Lane to the remains of Wilford

Priory. The Jury will know, but perhaps I should explain to you, sir, that the footpath is a private one through my grounds, but I have never made any objection to its use by persons interested in visiting the ruins."

"I quite understand," the Coroner said.

"The path leads close by the hedge of my garden," Mr. Baldock continued. "The lady was walking slowly and apparently deep in thought. When she came abreast of the garden—there is a gate in the hedge there—she seemed suddenly to become aware of my presence. She hesitated, then came towards the gate. I rose to meet her, thinking that perhaps she wished to see me. But her purpose was merely to ask if she were trespassing and to apologise if she were. She said she had not realised that the path was not a public one. I reassured her."

Mr. Baldock hesitated for a moment, cleared his throat once more, and went on :

"She thanked me, and made some conventional remark about the weather—that the coolness of the evening was very welcome after a trying day, as I remember—then she commented upon my garden and its unusual position among the ruined walls of the Priory, and as she appeared to be interested in flowers I invited her to enter and look round. She did so and remained for perhaps a quarter of an hour. We talked of gardens, in which she seemed to be interested, and although she did not tell me her name, she mentioned that she was staying for the night at the Black Boy, and spoke of its age and picturesqueness and asked me if I thought it had had any association with the Priory. And that led me, I am afraid, to bore her."

"To bore her?" the Coroner repeated, as though he were uncertain of the word.

"Yes, sir. I am apt sometimes to bore strangers with my dissertations upon the history of Wilford Priory. It is an all-absorbing study of mine and I do not always remember that others are not so much interested in antiquity as I am. I observed that the lady was paying little attention to my words and I broke off." Mr. Baldock spoke apologetically. "She then asked me if there were any way by which she could cross to the woods on the other side of the river and so make a round back to the inn. I explained that there was no other bridge for some three miles, but suggested that if she followed the footpath to the Refectory walls and continued straight on across the meadow it would bring her to the river bank, which she could follow back to Prior's Bridge, a round of little more than a mile. She said she would do so, and I walked with her as far as the Refectory and pointed out her way to her. That is the last I saw of her alive."

"Can you tell us at about what time it was that you left her at the Refectory, Mr. Baldock?" the Coroner asked.

"Half-past nine at the latest, perhaps a minute or two earlier," Mr. Baldock said.

"It was still quite light?"

"Oh, quite. The sun had not long been set."

"So if she had taken the walk you indicated she should have reached the bridge well before dark."

"Well before."

"I believe you went to the place where the lady's body was found by Mr. Ling."

"I did. That was on the Wednesday morning. About half-past twelve Cummings, my gardener, told me that Ling had come to the house to say that he had found a dead body in the river and wanted to telephone about it. Some minutes later I went with him and Ling to the river bank and saw—" Mr. Baldock was clearly distressed, his soft voice dropped to an even lower pitch, "—and saw—this poor lady—dead—on the bank. I wish that I had never recommended her to take that walk. It shocked me, sir—very, very much."

"I'm sure it would," the Coroner said sympathetically, and after a few moments Mr. Baldock pulled himself together.

"I think that is all I can tell you, sir," he said.

"There are just one or two points I should like you to make clear, Mr. Baldock," the Coroner responded. "The place where the body was recovered, would that have been approximately the place on the river bank to which you had directed Miss Warren?"

"No, sir, it was some way lower down."

"Do you remember if Miss Warren was carrying her bag with her when you saw her?"

"She was. I remember it. It was made of a very beautiful piece of old brocade. I noticed it particularly."

"Did you get the impression in the course of your conversation with her that she was—ill, or unduly distracted, or under any unusual mental strain. I mean did she appear to be in every way quite normal?"

Mr. Baldock hesitated as if he sought the absolutely correct words.

"Quite normal, sir," he said at length. "Tired, yes and undoubtedly nervous. Ill—that is hard to define, but I did get an impression once that she seemed faint. I offered her a chair in the garden and she sat down for a short time and smoked a cigarette. But she seemed quickly to recover. My own impression was that she had been much exhausted by the heat of

the day. Tired, yes tired, very tired was the impression she left with me."

"Would you have said she was in good spirits?"

"No. But in no way despondent. Her expression was sad, but I attributed that to her excessive fatigue. May I put it this way, sir, for I think this will really answer your question: I am convinced that Miss Warren when I left her had no other idea in mind but to take the walk I had suggested and return to the Black Boy Inn."

"That is very valuable testimony, Mr. Baldock. Thank you very much," the Coroner said, and turned to the Jury.

"Have you any questions you would like to put to Mr. Baldock?" he queried.

There was a whispered conversation among the Jurymen, then Ketton the Foreman said, "None, thank you, sir, Mr. Baldock's told us all we wanted to know. We all of us know the river where he means."

Mr. Edgar Baldock, with another prim bow to the Coroner, sat down.

2

Mr. Baldock's very definite evidence had all but convinced Merrow that his judgment was wrong; that he must have been dramatising the situation, reading into an expression and manner of immense fatigue a tragedy that did not exist just as old-fashioned Stephen Paternoster had read into a modern woman's demand for several whiskies and sodas an alcoholic condition that did not exist. He felt a sense of relief, and fixed his attention upon the next witness, the woman with the chestnut red hair.

She gave her name as Gwendoline Darcy.

"I have been Miss Warren's personal secretary for more than three years. She was an intimate and a very dear friend of mine," she said simply.

The Coroner put his questions in a kindly, sympathetic way and Miss Darcy told how she had last seen Janet Warren in Chelsea on the Tuesday morning.

"She left the studio about half-past nine," she said. "I saw her off in her car. She told me that she was going to the Beach Hotel at Shinglemouth and might be away for two or three nights or she might come back the next day. She was like that: she hated to bind herself to plans."

"Was this decision of hers to go to Shinglemouth a sudden one, do you know?"

"Yes, quite: but it did not surprise me. Miss Warren was in the habit of making sudden decisions. She was impulsive

always. She had said nothing about going away when I left the studio the night before, and she was waiting to leave when I arrived in the morning."

"Can you suggest any reason why she should wish to go away so unexpectedly?"

"Why, yes. It was to get away from London because of the heat. Miss Warren was peculiarly susceptible to the weather. She had been complaining of the heat for some days past. It upset her. She couldn't work and that always worried her: just now particularly because she had such a lot to do. She wanted to complete all her commissions before her fiancé returned. She was expecting him home in September."

"When you say she was worried, Miss Darcy, would you say she was seriously or unduly depressed or despondent?"

"No. No. No." The girl shook her head. "There was nothing of that kind." She gave a nervous little laugh. "Janet was always like that when she couldn't work—restless, short-tempered. She was so immensely keen on her work and tremendously conscientious about it. She hated not keeping faith, as she called it, with her sitters. The moment it turned cooler she would have been back and at work as cheerful as ever."

"So, as far as you know she had nothing unusual to worry her?"

"Nothing whatever."

"Had you ever known her to take sudden and impulsive journeys like this before?"

"Yes, last winter, during a cold foggy spell. It was just the same then. She got terribly moody and irritable and she went off all in a hurry. I didn't even know she'd gone till she rang me up from Bournemouth. And again, just after Easter, when she'd been working rather too hard. That was the first time she went to Shinglemouth. Someone had told her about the hotel, at lunch I think it was, and she came back, packed a bag and went off instantly."

"So she had been to Shinglemouth before?"

"Yes, that once. She liked it immensely and she said she would go again. I don't know the place myself but she told me that the hotel was terribly comfortable, and Janet—Miss Warren—loved comfort, and she liked it because I understand there's nothing much else there except the hotel. She hated resorts."

"We may take it that you did not think her sudden journey in any way an unusual one."

"Not a bit. I never gave it a second thought."

"There is one point that seems obscure: that of why Miss Warren did not go to the Shinglemouth Hotel, but stopped at the

Black Boy, intending to stay there for the night. Can you suggest any explanation of that?"

Gwen Darcy frowned. "I can suggest an explanation," she said after a short pause. "Whether it's the right one, of course, it's impossible for me to say. But I do know that she hated driving in traffic, particularly when she was nervous. She was not a good driver anyhow. I can only think she wanted to avoid the main coast road as much as possible and took a roundabout way. I suppose—I don't know—she could have got from London to Shinglemouth this way. Could she?" The girl looked about her as if seeking the answer to her question from someone in the Court.

Constable Hawes made as if to speak, and the Coroner said, "Do you want to say something, constable?"

"I only wanted to say, sir—I didn't mention it in my evidence because it didn't arise—but there was quite a new half-inch map in the deceased's car and I noticed from a label on it it was bought at Colchester. It covers the country between the Bury road and the coast, including Wilford and Shinglemouth. I thought that might have some bearing on what the witness has just said."

"Thank you, constable: yes, it might have some bearing. Will you continue, Miss Darcy?"

"Well, I can only think that if she did do that and was terribly tired, she might have decided suddenly not to go on till morning. The Black Boy Inn is just the quiet sort of place that would have appealed to her. She was always impulsive—I think I've said that before."

"It seems a possible explanation. Now will you tell us something of Miss Warren's health. Had she been indisposed in any way recently?"

"No, not really. She hadn't been eating very much—she never did in very hot weather. That made her a little—languid—perhaps. But not ill. Just tired, listless perhaps is the word."

"Have you ever known her to have fainting or giddy spells?"

"No. I can't remember any. She would complain of having no energy, that's all."

"Do you know if she had any worries apart from those of her work. Any family or financial worries?"

"No. She had no family, at least no near relations: none at all. She had often told me so. Her parents died when she was quite a child and she had no brothers or sisters. And she was earning plenty of money. She spent a lot, she was extravagant and generous but she had lots of work. I know because I looked after all that."

"Would you say she was quite happy—apart from these minor worries of which you have spoken."

"I should say she was quite contented and she was looking forward to a future of great happiness," the girl said very seriously.

The Coroner glanced at his notes and made no remark for a few moments. Then, "There are one or two further points upon which perhaps you can enlighten the Jury, Miss Darcy," he said. "You have heard that Miss Warren's bag has not been found. Can you say if she was likely to be carrying any large sum of money in it?"

"Not a large sum. Perhaps twenty pounds. I don't know, of course. She did not usually take more than what she would want for things like hotel bills and any small purchase. If she had wanted more for any purpose she would have telephoned me. She has done so in the past."

"Could she swim?"

"No. She was not athletic in any way."

"Just one final point: an important one which the Jury has already raised. Miss Warren registered at the Black Boy Inn as Helen West. Can you suggest any reason for her doing that?"

"Yes. I think so. You see, Miss Warren had had a lot of publicity in the newspapers and magazines, particularly after her engagement was announced last winter. It made her too well known. Often in hotels and restaurants perfect strangers would come up to her and ask her questions about art or ask her to look at some dreadful pictures they had painted or advise them. It really was a nuisance to her. So she sometimes used another name when she went to hotels: a sort of incognito so that people shouldn't bother her."

"Does that answer your question, gentlemen?" The Coroner turned to the Jury and received a mumbled chorus of "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," and the inquest drew quickly to its close.

A few formal, routine questions concluded Miss Darcy's evidence. A grave faced solicitor rose to state that he was present to represent Lord Reginald Sudbourne, who had instructed him to offer every assistance that it might be in his power to give. He spoke of the overwhelming distress that the appalling news of the tragic death of his fiancée had brought to his client, and the Coroner expressed his sympathy. And then he proceeded to address the Jury.

He reviewed the evidence in matter-of-fact forthright manner, and it was quickly obvious to Merrow, as it must have been to

the Jury, that in his view Janet Warren's death had been accidental.

But he gave full weight to the unusual points, the false name, the missing bag, the fact that the unfortunate woman had come to the Black Boy instead of going, as she had intended, to Shinglemouth.

"These are all matters that you must consider most carefully in weighing the evidence brought before you in order to determine how this unfortunate lady met her death," he said. "But although all, or any one of these details, may stimulate your imagination to suggest what might have happened, you must concern yourselves solely in arriving at your verdict with the sworn evidence that you have heard here this afternoon. Upon that and that only you are to decide.

"You will naturally ask yourselves three main questions. Firstly, was there any evidence to show that this lady came by her death by violence; by what is generally known as 'foul play.' I think you may eliminate that possibility from your minds. Secondly, you will ask: Did she take her own life? You will then consider—with the utmost care—what evidence has been offered to support that possibility. Has anything been brought to light in the course of this inquiry to show that the deceased was of unbalanced mind, or had any great sorrow or worry that could cause her to wish to cut short a life of comparative luxury, of successful and honourable achievement, and happy future? You will weigh most carefully the evidence offered by Doctor Danvers, her friend and medical attendant, by Miss Darcy, an even more intimate friend, and by Mr. Baldock, who had a long conversation with her perhaps but a few minutes, relatively speaking, before her death. Did any of the witnesses suggest a motive that could explain the taking of her own life?"

The Coroner was silent for a few moments, then very deliberately, he continued: "Unless you are absolutely satisfied that that motive has been shown, you will dismiss that possibility from your mind and you will ask the third question: Did the deceased come by her death by accident?"

"In considering that possibility you must give the fullest weight to the evidence of Doctor Fenn, and again that of Miss Darcy, and to that of Miss Paternoster. You may make use of your own knowledge of the hazards of the river bank between Priors Bridge and the place where the body was found, to one unfamiliar with them, and in a condition, as you have heard, possibly, not certainly by any means, to be overcome by a fainting attack owing to lack of proper nourishment, and who could not swim."

Again the Coroner was silent for a moment or two, then he concluded: "If you cannot find a satisfactory answer to any of these three questions, there is a fourth course open to you. You may say, in effect, we can't be sure how the deceased came to die. Your verdict then will be simply 'Found Drowned.' And if you cannot come to any other decision that completely satisfies you, that is the correct verdict that you should give. You will now retire to consider your verdict, and if there be any point that you wish made more clear you are at liberty to return and demand further evidence. I'm sure that you will all do your duty, however painful it may prove, in accordance with the oath that you have taken."

The Jury filed out to a back room, the Coroner sat back in his chair, and a subdued buzz of conversation broke out in the hall.

Ten minutes later the Jury returned a verdict of Accidental Death.

4

Merrow was conscious of a sense of relief when he heard the verdict. But the relief was tinged with disappointment. What he had imagined earlier would prove a sensational human tragedy had fallen flat.

There had been no dramatic revelations about Janet Warren's life, none of its hidden chapters given to the world. She had come by her death, so the Court found, as a result of an almost commonplace accident such as might have occurred to anybody. It was only human to be a little disappointed.

He watched the Hall clear; the public pushing its way out to discuss the verdict in the open air. Two or three of the reporters had already gone, hurrying to a telephone to send the news to the world. The rest packed up their notebooks and went more slowly talking among themselves and by their very leisureliness implying that sense of disappointment that Merrow felt.

Eve Paternoster and Ling went out together. Old Paternoster was talking to Doctor Fenn and Lord Reginald's solicitor had gone over to speak to the Coroner. Merrow was looking at Mr. Baldock and thinking how very much the City man he looked when Miss Darcy crossed to speak to him. He bowed to her gravely in the same way in which he had bowed to the Coroner, and they engaged in some earnest conversation.

Merrow trailed out in the rear of the spectators and found the road a turmoil of starting cars and gossiping people. He started slowly to make his way back to the inn.

Stephen Paternoster overtook him after a couple of minutes.

"Well, sir, that's that," he said. "A bad business, but it might have been worse."

"What do you mean? Don't you agree with the verdict, Stephen?"

"I don't see why not, sir. You know the river bank. It's a rum old place when it's getting dark if you don't know your way. Just as well as it is. No good ever come of trying to stir up troubles. There's some as would have tried to make a song and dance about the poor lady being low-spirited and all that. But not Mr. Gardener, that's our Coroner. He's a kind gentleman, sir, and very shrewd. You can't fool him. If he thought there'd been any hanky-panky he'd have been down on it like knife. I reckon he was satisfied or he'd have said so. And anyhow," Stephen added with a sudden burst of frankness, "supposing she had been a bit crazy what good's it going to do her or anyone to suggest she did it herself? Wouldn't bring her back and it 'ud be very painful for them she'd left behind. That's that, sir, and we've all got to be thankful it's no more."

"I suppose you're right, Stephen," Merrow said. "It's sad, damnably sad, but we can't do any good by worrying about it."

"That's a fact, sir. And the best thing we can do is to forget it."

Old Stephen was wise. Merrow took his line without reluctance. Better forget that unfortunate incident and come back to happier thoughts.

"It's made you pretty busy at the Black Boy anyhow," he said.

"Too busy, Mr. Merrow, but not the kind of trade I like. Doesn't do much good. Puts you all out with your catering and your cellar. Makes you short for your regular customers and puts them out. No, sir, you'll learn when you know a bit more about the business that it's the steady regular trade that matters. That buys your bread and butter and pays your bills."

"I hope we will be getting that steady regular trade soon, Stephen," Merrow laughed. "But I want to see it steadily increasing. Building up, Stephen, that's what we're going to do. And now this bad business is over, I want to make a start at once. I want a long talk with you to-night."

"Very good, sir. I'll be glad enough to see the old Black Boy going ahead again. They'll all be gone before dinner and we'll be quiet again."

But they could not ignore the tragedy entirely. Miss Darcy and Doctor Danvers passed them in a car just before they reached the inn.

"They've been staying at the Black Boy, I see," Merrow said rather pointlessly.

"Yes. A nice lady," Stephen commented. "I feel very sorry for her, sir." Then in another burst of candour. "I reckon she knew a lot more than she said."

"Why do you say that, Stephen?"

Paternoster nodded sagely.

"Because of one or two remarks she passed to me, casual like—at least she meant me to think so. But I knew what she was after." The old man jerked his arm up in the motion of drinking. "She guessed, sir, but of course I never said a word."

There was a motor lorry outside the inn when they reached it. The potman was talking to the driver.

"What's this, Tom: something for me?" Paternoster said, joining them.

"No, sir, a dozen cases of wine for Mr. Merrow," Tom answered with a grin. "Looks as if you're going to make a long stay with us, sir, if you're going to drink that lot. We've stood it in the private parlour for the time. That's all right, I suppose, sir?"

"Quite. You see I've made a start already, Stephen," Merrow laughed.

5

Hugh Merrow enjoyed himself that afternoon. He did his first job at the Black Boy. Down in the cellar, alone, he unpacked that wine and stood it away in bins, dreaming as he did so. When at length he came up and went to his room to wash, the inn had reverted to its normal quiet.

Merrow came down to his tea, hungry and happy. He had not thought of Janet Warren for a couple of hours.

But the sight of Doctor Danvers standing in the hall, two suitcases by his side, brought the tragedy back to his mind unbidden. The chestnut-haired girl, Miss Darcy, came in through the porch at the moment.

"I've brought the car round," she said to the doctor. "If you're ready we might as well get off."

"I'm quite ready," he said, and Stephen came out of his office to carry the luggage and see his guests off. Merrow went on to the dining room.

But a moment later the girl had followed him there. She spoke without any embarrassment.

"I saw you at the inquest," she said simply. "Were you a friend of hers?"

"No." Merrow shook his head. It was he who felt em-

barrassed. "I only went because—I—happened to be staying here that night and I—I saw—Miss Warren—here, in the dining room at dinner time. That's all."

"I see. Did you speak to her by any chance? You'll forgive me, won't you, but—well, you see—her death—has been a great shock to me—and a very great loss. And I would terribly like to know—everything I can know about her—particularly just before—the end."

"No. In fact I only saw her for a few minutes. I was just finishing my meal when she came in."

"I see," the girl said again. "Did she look terribly tired?"

Merrow hesitated, then: "Yes, she did," he admitted. "But she seemed better after her dinner. She passed me in the porch there when she went out and I thought she seemed much better."

The girl looked away for a moment as if uncertain whether to put another question. But all she said was, almost to herself. "Poor Jane! She never could take care of herself properly. You will forgive me for asking you, won't you? But you understand." She smiled frankly, and as she turned to go: "This picturesque old inn is just the sort of place that would appeal to her. She'd have loved it if—Oh, hell! I'm sorry. Good-bye. Thank you so much."

She had gone leaving Merrow with the impression of another woman with something hidden in her life. But unlike her dead friend, Janet Warren, Gwendoline Darcy's nerves were not frayed. There was stern and steady purpose in her brown eyes. The sort of woman who would make a good friend but a bad enemy.

Old Stephen was right—he generally was about people—she knew a bit, more than a bit, more than she had told. And although he wanted to get Janet Warren and everything connected with her out of his mind, while he ate his tea, Merrow thought of nothing else but her and of what Gwen Darcy knew and hadn't told.

It would be drink, he decided before he rose. Women like Janet Warren, brilliant, successful, highly strung, were all too apt to take to it in times of worry. Maybe, like men he had known, she went on an occasional "bat" and Miss Darcy knew it. And maybe the Coroner knew it too. But again old Stephen was right, no good would have come of bringing out that point at the inquest and "it 'ud be very painful for them she's left behind."

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

MERROW had his long talk with Stephen Paternoster that night and for the first time he told him in detail what he intended to do to the inn. Stephen listened attentively, though it was clear he was not greatly impressed with Merrow's ideas. But he summed them up after a while.

"I see, sir. You're going to make it antique-like," he said.

"That's the idea, Stephen: but antique-like with comfort."

"Very good, sir. You'll know more about such things than I do: but I'm sure I'll help you all I can. What would be the first thing you'd be wanting to do?"

Merrow poured out his plans to him in a spate and old Stephen provided a necessary corrective.

"You mustn't start trying to do all that at once," he said.

"You'll drive your customers away. The old place may be a bit shabby, I'm not denying that. But people who will put up with shabbiness won't with builders' dust and dirt. You leave that for the winter, sir, and do a bit at a time."

"All right, Stephen, I won't do it all at once." Merrow laughed. "But I am going to do the parlour and I am going to do the dining room walls, and I've a mind to do a bit to the hall too, but will take 'em one at a time. Now I think I'll start on the parlour."

"That'll mean fixing up the private parlour," Stephen said. "Got to put your customers somewhere while you're doing it, you know."

"Yes, of course," Merrow said, mildly abashed at not having foreseen so obvious a necessity. "How long will it take to do that?"

They went off to look at the private parlour there and then. It was slightly smaller than the parlour itself and looked looked upon the yard. The room clearly had not been occupied for a long time and was used to house odd bits of furniture and boxes. But it would do. Stephen reckoned they could get it ready in a couple of days and recalled how when he was a lad it used to be their private sitting room.

"We used to live in a better way in those days than what we do now, sir," he said. "It wasn't only the Black Boy my father had. He used to rent Monks Farm over by the river there. But farming's gone back like inn keeping; leastways in Wilford."

He became reminiscent, and Merrow asked if there had always been paper on the walls of the parlour in his time.

"God bless my soul, no, sir. Rough old walls it used to have, all whitewashed. My father had it papered over when bicycling first came in. That 'ud be before your time, Mr. Merrow. What, fifty years ago nearly. People used to ride out on their machines, as they called 'em, from Wilborough and round about and want teas, so father he had that done up to serve them in in the afternoons and I recall how some of the old chaps who used it regular in the evenings didn't like the papering. Called it new-fangled. And now you want to get the whitewashed walls back again, and I doubt there's some as won't like that. You can't please everybody, though you've got to try in this business."

Merrow went to bed that night well satisfied with his talk. Stephen was immensely helpful and slowly beginning to understand his ideas. He had promised to get along a good man to do the work the next morning, Bob Ketton—"the chap that was foreman of the Jury this afternoon," he explained.

And that was the only reference either of them had made of Janet Warren's death during the whole evening.

2

Then followed hectic weeks. There were journeys to London and more to Wilborough—it seemed that he was always going into Wilborough about something—sessions with the valuers and with brewer's travellers, to whom Paternoster introduced him gravely as the new proprietor, and who were full of bright ideas for supplying him with all sorts of drinks he didn't want. But Stephen stood by him nobly there and taught him how to deal with travellers.

Between-whiles Bob Ketton was always wanting to see him about something, or the man who had come to fix the refrigerator or the telephone man. And on top of it all were the many hours spent trying to learn his new business.

Merrow had but little idea of the ramifications of an inn-keeper's job. He took lessons in catering from Eve and in bar-tending from Tom Self. He learnt about breakages and was appalled at their number. He sat with old Paternoster in the evenings studying hotel book-keeping and picking up a rough idea of the law and its numberless forms and regulations as they affected inns, and Stephen laughed at him in his quiet way and said, "This is nothing, sir. You wait till the licence is transferred to you; that's when you'll have to look out for yourself."

"That's not going to be for a bit yet, Stephen," Merrow laughed back, and tried by ceaseless questionings to get things clearer in his mind.

And the more he learned the more he realised how much yet

there was to learn. But he did realise too that the resources of the Black Boy were even greater than he had expected. There were unused rooms in the house that could be furnished as staff quarters, freeing bedrooms for letting. The sturdy old, neglected Brewhouse in the Yard would make the foundation for further enlargement in years not too far ahead, he hoped. And the huge garden was a joy to him. It should be able to provide all the vegetables and fruit and flowers the house would ever want, and he developed a scheme for pigs down at the far-end and home-cured hams and bacon a speciality of the menu. But though there were interminable delays, things slowly began to shape aright. It took nearly a fortnight before Bob Ketton's job was finished. But it was a good job. Ketton had transformed the dingy old parlour into a charming room with moulded oak ceiling beams and heavy timber work in the walls and a fine open hearth surmounted by a noble decorated beam on which Tudor roses were carved.

Upon Stephen Paternoster the effect was interesting.

"Well! Well! Well!" he said as he looked about the room. "And to think all that was there and I never knew it. I'm coming to see there's something in what you said after all, Mr. Merrow. But it'll never make a parlour again." He shook his head knowingly and his voice dropped. "You know they won't like it—not to sit in." He indicated the new quarters of the "regulars."

"That's all right, Stephen, we'll make 'em more comfortable where they are," Merrow said. "Anyhow I'll want to use this as the dining room while Ketton gets on to that job."

Gradually Merrow was feeling his feet and beginning to get the hang of his job. Trade was improving despite the chaos that Bob Ketton's men had wrought. Chance customers who stopped for lunches were enthusiastic about the appearance of the parlour—Merrow was determined to keep that name though Paternoster wanted to call it the smoking room and Eve thought the lounge would sound ever so nice. Local business improved too as the news got about of changes the new owner was making up at the Black Boy, and old Stephen swung from his first mood of mild scepticism to one of restrained approval of the new regime.

There was a great moment when at length Ketton and his men, their paints and ladders and brushes and dust sheets, departed. That was in the middle of a wet Saturday afternoon, and by opening time on Sunday, very weary with much moving of furniture, but very proud, Hugh Merrow was able to get his first real idea of what his Black Boy was going to look like. And he found it very satisfying.

Of course there was a tremendous lot more to be done. But for new carpets and a little new furnishing the bedrooms had hardly been touched. But he had dressed his shop window.

He was particularly pleased with the change he had made in the hall. Instead of worn, shabby linoleum there was a floor of wide polished oak boards upon which lay a big servicable modern oriental rug. Layers of paint had been removed from the little window of Stephen's office-bar and it was now of a pleasant creamy white. And the staircase: he had hardly ever noticed it in the old days. Layers of bilious green paint had been removed from its banisters, displaying for the first time for many years its original oak. He had decorated the place with a tall grandfather clock and a few old prints, and it gave him immense pleasure to hear one of the first customers who stopped for lunch the next day exclaim as he entered: "By Jove, this looks an attractive old place."

Hugh Merrow agreed wholeheartedly. It did.

That was a busy Sunday. The rain had cleared and there was a lot of holiday traffic on the road. The last luncheon table had hardly been cleared before the first of the tea customers arrived, and soon after six o'clock Stephen told him with glee that for the first time for years the house was full.

"Lady just telephoned wanting to come for a night or two and I give her the last room. Ah!" Old Paternoster rubbed his hands. "It's like old times, sir. It does my heart good. Excuse me, sir, there's Mr. Baldock." Stephen went out of the office and Merrow glanced at the pile of counterfoils of lunch and tea bills, and it did his heart good too.

Presently Stephen returned accompanied by Baldock.

"You've been making some very excellent improvements here, Mr. Merrow," Baldock said when Stephen had introduced them. "I've been away for a week or two but my man, Cummings, told me there were changes going on—Cummings is one of Mr. Paternoster's regular customers, you know—but I never expected to find this. It's interesting, most interesting. Mr. Paternoster's just been showing me the beams in the old parlour. That's earlier work than I should have expected to find in this house."

"How old 'ud you reckon they'd be, sir?" Paternoster asked.

"Four hundred years at least," Baldock said.

"Well, well, well: what do you think of that!" the old fellow responded with amazement. "Four hundred years!"

Even Paternoster came in at the front door and called through the window, "May I speak to you for a moment, Dad?" and

Stephen went out murmuring, "Four hundred years!" and Baldock continued. "I should place them as early sixteenth century at the latest; wouldn't you, Mr. Merrow?"

"I'm afraid I'm not sufficient of an antiquary to offer an opinion, Mr. Baldock," Merrow answered. "But I should be very glad to have your views. I'd like to know something of the history of the Black Boy."

"I must see if I can trace anything," Baldock said, peering at Merrow through his thick glasses. "I've always had an idea the house might have had some connection with the Priory; Guest House or something of that kind. Do you know, Mr. Merrow, I find it a fascinating hobby digging into the past. Not that I'm a great antiquary. But I'm keen. Let me see, haven't we met before?"

"I don't think so, sir."

"Your face seems familiar somehow."

"You may have seen me at the inquest on Miss Warren a few weeks ago."

"Ah, I expect that's it," Baldock said, as though he were relieved to find that his memory had not deceived him. "What a bad business that was."

"A very sad affair." Merrow changed the subject. He did not want to discuss Janet Warren; he wanted to forget the unhappy episode. "I'm interested to hear you suggest a connection between this place and the Priory. A guest house, you say? Do sit down and join me in a glass of sherry. I've restocked the cellar and I'd like to have your opinion on my dry sherry."

Baldock beamed. "That's very kind of you," he said, then with a confidential nod, "Between ourselves, Paternoster's cellar needed restocking. Good fellow, Paternoster—a great deal better than his wines." Mr. Baldock gave a queer, smooth chuckle and added, "Yes, a great deal better."

He approved of the sherry and over it talked prosily about the history of the Priory, breaking off suddenly with: "But I'm boring you." That brought back to Merrow's mind the inquest once more and how Baldock had admitted in his evidence that he realised that he was boring Janet Warren. He began to protest politely. There was something pathetic about the man's consciousness that his hobby did not interest other people, when he was so patently enthusiastic about that hobby.

But Baldock brushed the protest aside.

"I know my failings," he said. "I'm always doing it," and then abruptly, peering at Merrow again, "Paternoster says it's your first venture in this line of business."

"Yes, it is."

"Then I must say you've made a very good start. May I ask what made you take it up? If I may say so it's—well unusual for a man like yourself."

"Oh, I don't know. The idea's always appealed to me and I think I can make it pay. Anyhow I'm going to find it more amusing than the City, I think."

"Were you in the City? So was I for years. In the Insurance business. I wonder if we ever met."

Merrow explained and Baldock said he knew of his old firm. They talked City for a while, then Baldock rose to leave.

"I wish you every success," he said. "And when you have time I'll always be glad to see you at the Priory, if you care to walk up. I'm not overburdened with intelligent neighbours here. I should welcome the opportunity of a chat now and then. And," he smiled bleakly, "I'll try not to bore you. But I'm too apt to bore people. That poor girl. It's foolish, perhaps, but I can't get her out of my mind. She seemed happy enough sitting there in my garden until I started talking about the Priory. She looked so very tired, I can't forget that either: I made her restless and she wanted to leave. If I hadn't bored her—maybe she would have sat on and never gone for her—last walk."

Baldock's statement made Merrow uncomfortable.

"I'm sure you needn't feel that way about it," he responded quickly. "The thing was sheer accident——"

"But you didn't see her and talk to her as I did, Mr. Merrow."

"I saw her. I was staying here in the house that evening."

"Did you know her?"

"No, no. I didn't know who she was till I saw it in the papers."

"And how did she strike you? Very highly strung, I thought. These brilliant people so often are."

"Yes. I suppose I did think her highly strung, but I'm afraid I didn't take much notice of her. Merrow was annoyed to find he was drifting into the discussion he wanted to avoid and again tried to change the subject. "I only saw her for a few moments."

"A great loss, a great loss, and a sad pity," Baldock said with a shake of the head. "And I'm afraid poor Paternoster must have been badly worried at the time. I think he had an idea that the unfortunate lady was not, what shall I say? Not quite responsible for herself. But I'm convinced from my brief conversation that there was nothing of that sort. But you know what it is, Mr. Merrow: people always rush to dramatic conclusions, particularly simple country folk such as we have round us here."

Merrow read into this that the story of Janet Warren's drinks had somehow got about.

"Yes. I suppose they do," he said shortly, then to check Baldock's further curiosity, "It was a bad business altogether, Mr. Baldock, and perhaps you'll understand me when I say that for the sake of everybody concerned I hope it will soon be forgotten."

Baldock looked up at him once more, in his queer peering way, and answered after a second or two, "Yes. I take your meaning. You're quite right. I'd forgotten. It affects you now. But I shouldn't worry, Mr. Merrow. It will soon be forgotten."

Merrow went with him to the door, promising to walk up to the Priors shortly, and as Baldock ambled away, a queer hunched figure, leaning heavily on his stick, a car drew up, and in the driver's seat Merrow recognised the distinctive chestnut hair of Gwendoline Darcy.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

MERROW turned back to the office frowning.

There was no doubt about it, it was the red-haired Darcy girl and she was coming into the inn behind him.

He swore softly. This was going to mean more digging up of that infernal business of Janet Warren's death. He felt sure of it. The association of that damned tragedy was going to stick to the Black Boy inn forever.

Then he suddenly realised that Stephen was nowhere about, nor Tom Self, and that the Darcy girl was standing at the office window looking about for somebody to attend to her and that he would have to be that somebody, and for the first time to receive a guest, alone.

A fit of intense self-consciousness seized him and he heard himself talking, not like Hugh Merrow, but like a head waiter in a restaurant or on the stage.

"Good-evening, madam," he said, and involuntarily bowed slightly—just like a head waiter—"can I do anything for you?"

"Oh—oh, good-evening," she said with a quick smile of recognition. "I was looking for Mr. Paternoster or someone. I want someone to bring my bag in. Is Mr. Paternoster about?"

Merrow felt completely lost, but he made the plunge.

"Certainly, madam, I'll bring it in—er—I'll find the boots—"

"Please don't bother: he'll be here in a moment. Isn't there a bell?"

Merrow remembered that there was a bell, and he rang it, then, more stage waiter-like than ever, "Have you engaged a room, madam?"

"Yes." She looked at him in a puzzled way. "I rang up this afternoon and somebody, I thought it was Mr. Paternoster, said it was all right."

"Miss Darcy, isn't it?" Merrow was looking for the inn register.

"Yes. But—you're not the manager or the owner, are you?"

"Yes. I am the proprietor."

"Really!" He liked the way in which she drawled the word.

"I'd no idea of this. I thought Mr. Paternoster owned it."

"He did but I"—he almost said "Have recently acquired"—bought it a week or two ago."

"Really!" Again that fascinating drawl. "I say, then you're responsible for all these changes. It's simply marvellous the transformation you've made." She was looking about her appreciatively. "I can hardly believe it."

"Yes. We have made some changes," Merrow said stiltedly. Then Stephen appeared from the back and took charge, and the way in which he handled the situation made Hugh Merrow feel that he was a complete ass. He was so easy.

"Oh, good-afternoon, miss," he said with a welcoming smile. "I thought it would be you when I heard the name, but I couldn't be sure. Number three, miss, the same room you had before: I remember you said you liked it."

The girl smiled, and Self came in answer to Merrow's ring.

"Tom, take this lady's luggage up to number three," Paternoster went on. "And if you just sign the register, miss——"

Merrow retreated to the back of the office bar and poured himself out a glass of sherry. He had a deuce of a lot to learn about this job yet.

Presently Stephen joined him, having disposed of the new arrival. He looked worried.

"That's a funny thing, Mr. Merrow," he said as he came in, "that lady turning up just at this moment. Not sure it isn't going to save us a lot of trouble though."

"Why do you say that, Stephen?" Merrow asked.

"Well, sir, you remember Evie called me away just now when you were talking to Mr. Baldock?"

"Yes."

"She'd been out for a breath of air after the teas were cleared; just for half an hour like she often does, and she'd been up along by the river through the woods, and what do you think she's come back with?" Stephen put the question dramatically.

"What?"

"That Miss Warren's handbag. Saw it, she did, in the water stuck under an old root. And got her shoes and stockings in a pretty pickle getting it out too. But it's the bag all right, and it's drying in the hot cupboard now. That's what she wanted to see me about."

"Good lord, Stephen!" Merrow exclaimed. "What an extraordinary coincidence! But what are we going to do about it?"

"That's what I mean, sir. Regular worried me it did at first, because we'd have had to handed it over to the constable, and that 'ud started all the talk again, and we don't want that talk about this house, sir. We've had quite enough as it is."

"I agree," Merrow said seriously. "Still, I don't know—"

"Well, as I see it," Stephen interrupted, "if we hand the bag over to Miss Darcy we've done our duty. No one will know anything about it. Evie'll keep her mouth shut and so will we. And if you had a word with the lady after dinner and put it to her, so to speak, I doubt she'd keep her mouth shut too. It's worth trying anyhow. And there's nothing wrong about it. It 'ud go back to her, I suppose, in the end."

Merrow was uncertain. Stephen's suggestion seemed distinctly irregular, but it was thoroughly practical.

"I'll think it over, Stephen," he said. "Anyhow I'll talk to Miss Darcy and see what she thinks. We mustn't do anything that would cause more trouble later."

"You take it from me, sir," Stephen said, wagging his head sagely. "Everybody want to forget that bad business and no one will thank us for stirring it up again. You have a word with her. I mean, of course, if she won't have it—well."

"I'll talk to her, Stephen," Merrow repeated.

2

Merrow had already discovered that if you keep an inn you do not take your meals at normal hours.

Stephen always took his in the kitchen at odd times: Merrow had made a habit in recent days, when the Black Boy had been busy, of lunching and dining late, after his guests had left the dining room. It meant, of course, that you had the food at its worst, and he intended later to devise a different scheme—have food in his own sitting room, perhaps, when he had fixed that up—but for the moment he was content to adapt himself to the circumstances.

That evening he came to his dinner later than usual, for he had been relieving Stephen in the office while the old fellow

gave a hand to Evie and Florence, the hired waitress, in serving coffee and drinks in the parlour. It was nearly nine when he went into the dining room.

Even so it was not vacant. The chestnut-haired Miss Darcy still sat over her meal. She looked very attractive, he thought, for she had changed for dinner, unlike the rest of the visitors, and, sitting there, eating the sweet, in a simple dinner frock of black she gave a tone to his dining room that pleased him.

She smiled at him as he entered and he felt that some definite acknowledgment was demanded. After all he must learn how, naturally, to treat his customers, and he stopped on his way across to his table by the window to speak to her.

But there must be no more stage-waiter mannerisms. He smiled in return.

"I hope you've found everything to your liking, Miss Darcy," he said.

"Charming," she answered. "I do most sincerely congratulate you, Mr. Merrow." She had learnt his name then. "You have made your very picturesque old inn a most comfortable one, an inn of—did you ever read Lord Torrington's diary?—an inn of method and manners, I think he described a place he stayed at. Or was it manners and method? Anyhow, that's how I feel about the Black Boy."

That pleased Hugh Merrow and swept away the last trace of his self-consciousness.

"I *am* glad to hear you say that," he replied. "You see I've got all sorts of schemes for this old place and I've hardly been able to start yet.—This room for instance. It's just a make-shift. It doesn't look bad, but——"

"It doesn't look at all bad," she interrupted. "Those old prints—and they're genuine too. I've looked at them—on these walls are just right. But, Mr. Merrow, what's behind that paper: have you ever looked?"

"Not yet. It's stretched on canvas."

"I'd look if I were you. You might find some Georgian panelling. Don't mind my making suggestion, but I used to write on interior decorating before I went to Jane—Miss Warren. And I've had a bit of experience."

"By Jove! If there were. You mean that white painted stuff?"

"Not too white. But it would be the making of this room."

"It would indeed," Merrow's enthusiasm was surging. "I'd be awfully glad if you'd give me a few hints—All right, Florence, in a moment." He turned to speak to the waitress, who had already served his soup and was hovering uncertainly between the two tables.

"But I'm keeping you from your dinner," Miss Darcy said.

"No, no. It doesn't matter a bit. This is much more important."

"Florence doesn't think so," the girl laughed. "Mr. Merrow, may I, or is it against the rules? mayn't I have my coffee at the—'captain's table'? It's allowed on board ship. Then we can go on talking. And I've got something else I want to say to you."

"If you don't mind, of course." He spoke to the waitress and they moved across to the window. "You had something you wanted to say to me?"

The girl's eyes wrinkled in amusement.

"Yes. You know I think you ought to know me."

He looked at her searchingly for a few moments and she went on:

"Haven't you a sister, Joan?"

"Yes."

"Lords," she said. "The Eton and Harrow match. I think it was seventeen years ago. Can you remember as long as that?"

Suddenly a long closed cell in his memory opened.

"Why, of course," he said. "Gwen Darcy. The red-haired kid, Joan called you. You were a pal of hers. I remember distinctly now."

"You entertained us beautifully even then. You bought us lots of ices."

"Did I? But you've changed a lot, you know."

"One does unfortunately in seventeen years."

His memory was growing clearer.

"You were a relation of Reggie Sudbourne's, weren't you? He was in the Eleven that year."

"Only a poor relation. A cousin, as a matter of fact."

He had spoken of Reggie Sudbourne without any thought of Janet Warren's death, and as that flashed into his mind he frowned.

But Gwen Darcy seemed to read his thoughts. She went on seriously:

"Now we've got my identity clear, let's get something else clear. You were thinking of Jane—Janet Warren, weren't you?"

"Yes. Yes, I had forgotten for the moment." He spoke in a subdued tone.

"My dear Mr. Merrow, or Hugh, as I called you that day at Lons— I'm a grown up woman and a sensible woman. And a practical woman too." She snapped out the last words. "I had perhaps as much affection for Janet Warren as anybody in the world. She was a very near and dear friend. But we can't

stop talking about Reggie Sudbourne because Jane's dead. And we can't stop talking about her either. It's just damned silly, and Victorian all this sepulchral voice business about the dead. I want to talk about Janet often. And perhaps you wonder why I came back here so soon. It's full of sad and tragic memories, you may be thinking. Well, I don't propose to let sad or tragic memories put up all sorts of inhibitions in my life. God knows Jane would have been the last person to want it. There never was a more logical, practical—and brave—woman. I came back here deliberately for a short holiday."

She looked at him defiantly, and he answered weakly, "You are quite right—Gwen. It's the sensible and proper point of view to take."

"I know it is," she continued. "I've been working very hard, clearing up Jane's papers and things, and I want a rest. I liked the look of this place and this country when I was here for the inquest, and I meant to come back. And I've come back. Not in any soppy, sentimental mood, Hugh, but to enjoy myself if I can, and rest. And any memories I have of her are going to be pleasant ones. Janet's dead, and I've lost a good friend. But moping and mourning's not going to do me or her any good. The world has lost a fine painter. That's what's most to be regretted. Now do we know where we stand?"

He guessed that this outburst was but a cloak to hide a very deep grief. He believed too that Gwen Darcy's sole reason for coming to Wilford and the Black Boy was entirely sentimental. But he could best help her, and he wanted to help her, by playing up to her professed hard and unsentimental pretence.

"I understand perfectly," he said. "And I'm particularly glad you've come just now—this evening even."

"Why?" she demanded sharply.

He glanced quickly about the room. Florence had gone to fetch his next course.

"I'll explain in detail later on. But Miss Warren's missing bag has just been found——"

"Who found it? Where is it? I've got to see it," she broke in with an eagerness that surprised him.

The waitress was coming in at the door.

"You shall," he said.

Free - No 3 1669

Merrow had taken for his own use, Number One, the biggest bedroom of the inn. It was a pleasant room at the corner of the house with one window looking out to the front and the Black Boy sign and the other giving on to the Priory Lane.

He had ideas for more adequate quarters with a sitting room later on, but until the season was over he settled himself in Number One and turned it into a comfortable bed-sitting room.

He had his writing desk where he could look out at the smiling Black Boy, one or two of his favourite pictures on the walls, a few books in a case and more stacked in a corner, and it served him well enough.

Here, when he had finished his dinner, he brought Gwen Darcy, then went in search of Janet's bag.

He had explained to Gwen at the table the circumstances in which the bag had been found, and when he told her of Stephen's suggestion that it be handed over to her she agreed instantly.

"I don't care what you ought to do officially," she said, "but I do know that it would come to me in the end, and you know what the papers are. They'd only make a sensation of it, and I don't want poor Janet's memory connected with any more sensation. I'll send on anything of value to the lawyers and deal with the rest as I've dealt with all her papers."

That decided Merrow. It was common sense and he wasn't going to worry about officialdom. He found Stephen in the office, and told him, adding, "Perhaps Eve had better take the thing to Miss Darcy herself. I expect she'd like to hear exactly how and where Eve found it."

Old Paternoster was obviously pleased.

"It's the sensiblest thing to do, sir," he said. "I'll tell her."

Merrow deliberately delayed for some minutes chatting with Stephen before he returned to his room. He wanted to give Gwen Darcy her chance to talk to Eve. When at length he did go up, Eve was just leaving. She looked subdued, but pleased, and Merrow guessed that Gwen Darcy had tipped her.

Gwen herself was staring from the window when he went in. The bag was lying, unopened, on a chair. It was a large and gay thing of bright colours in a formal design, which seemed none the worse for its immersion. Gwen turned. She, too, was subdued.

"Oh, there you are," she said. "I didn't want to open—it—until you came. I suppose there ought to be some sort of a witness."

"I don't want to be a witness," Merrow responded. "It's nothing to do with me. Eve found the bag and gave it to you, as the obvious person. Unless we're asked we shall say nothing about it; and if we are, that's what we shall say."

She smiled, a little sadly.

"I see. Thank you very much, Hugh. You've been terribly understanding. I think I'll take it away now and, and—get it

over—if you don't mind." She picked up the bag and went slowly to the door, and all he said was "Yes, do."

But as Gwen Darcy went out he was confirmed in his earlier belief. The girl was feeling the loss of her friend very deeply, despite her protestations of lack of sentiment.

She looked immensely worried and he was devilish sorry for her. She wasn't going to have much fun looking through the contents of that sodden bag.

CHAPTER NINE

I

WHEN Merrow went up to bed, just before midnight, he noticed that a light was showing under the door of Gwen Darcy's room. It was still showing an hour later.

He did not see her in the morning, for he had to go over to Wilborough, but he passed her car, without knowing it, on his way back. Gwen was bound for the coast; for Shinglemouth.

Shinglemouth is an extraordinary little place. Until a few years ago it was nothing but a huddle of fishermen's cottages, set about the weatherbeaten, tarred-walled Smack Inn, and one large gaunt villa that had been in turn a boarding house, a convalescent home and a nursing home for rest cure patients. It had failed in each capacity.

But one of the rest cure patients had been a Mr. Gulio Leone, assistant manager of one of the more expensive London hotels. Mr. Leone had gained much benefit from his cure, had fallen in love with the air and the remoteness of Shinglemouth, and had dreamed a dream.

That dream had become the Shinglemouth Beach Hotel, a biggish, ultra-modern erection, of which Mr. Leone was proprietor and manager.

Because of its novelty, its luxury and its expensive tariff, the Beach Hotel had been a success. Harley Street recommended it to jaded financiers and nerve-strained theatrical stars. The richer painters and writers patronised it. A minor royalty had spent a week there incognito.

Mr. Leone was at pains to discourage blatant or undesirable guests, for he knew the value of his hotel's reputation. People came there to be quiet, to do nothing, and to be extremely well fed. Mr. Leone saw to it that in these matters they were satisfied. But he was a cunning and knowledgeable man, and fully alive to the value of publicity—the proper sort of publicity. He was more than pleased when he had received a notification from

Harlequinade, the Society weekly, to say that their representative making a tour of the East Coast might be calling at the Shinglemouth Beach Hotel shortly. *Harlequinade* was read by just the right people and its "At the Hotels" column was very sound.

Gwen Darcy came to Shinglemouth that morning by a mile of lonely winding road across dyke-scarred marshes where lazy cattle browsed and solemn herons fished in the wide ditches, and the rich green levels stretched away on either side of her as far as the eye could see.

Ahead the skyline was broken by the huddle of cottages that made up old Shinglemouth and the great square form of its hotel. Gwen thought how ugly the building looked; how utterly out of keeping, like some featureless modern factory building set down in this remote stretch of coast.

A tamarisk-bordered drive through rather bleak windswept grounds led to the hotel, and when she reached it she had to admit that its situation was entrancing. It stood on the very edge of a wide sloping shingle beach, rising, as it seemed, sheer from the grey North Sea itself. On a broad terrace in front were little tables in café fashion where visitors sat idly over drinks or lounged in the sun in long chairs, ostentatiously doing nothing, and away to the left, constructed in the shingle, was a big bathing pool.

Gwen parked her car and found an empty table on the terrace. When she ordered herself a cocktail she told the waiter to reserve a table for lunch. Then for a while she occupied herself in regarding the Beach Hotel's visitors.

Youth was lacking. They were mostly middle-aged; a comfortable, well-to-do looking crowd who knew the good things of life and were in the habit of enjoying them. She recognized one or two of them: Mrs. Luke Sibton, the popular novelist, with her two serious Pekinese and half a dozen people paying court to her; Frederick Kening, the actor with red-haired Pearson Young, who was writing a new play for him. Norah Bellingham the architect, who was all the rage for country cottages at the moment, and a weary lined-faced man whose name escaped her, but whom she knew to be one of the big criminal lawyers.

Gwen was interested. The hotel was living up to its reputation as a haunt of celebrities. She finished her drink and went early to lunch. She had the big airy dining room almost to herself during the greater part of it. But although the lunch was an exceptionally good one Gwen was in no mood properly to appreciate it. Her mind was on other things, filled with vague surmises and uncertainties. At last she called for her bill.

"I'll have my coffee on the terrace," she said to the waiter. "And—"—she took a card from her bag and scribbled "*Harlequinade*" on it—"and will you please take that to Mr. Leone or whoever is acting for him if he is not here," she added.

A few moments later she was being ushered into Mr. Guilo Leone's private room.

2

Leone was a grave-faced, swarthy Italian, with a smooth, suave manner and sad expressive dark eyes. He was dressed smartly in a short black coat and pin-striped trousers, as though he were still in the London hotel which he had deserted for Shinglemouth.

"Ah, madam, how good of you to come so soon," he said rising to greet Gwen. "But why did you not let me know when you arrived? You have already lunched, I hear. Had I known I would have ordered your lunch myself. You should have had something—extraordinary. We are proud of our cuisine at Shinglemouth." He extended his hands in a vague, expressive gesture.

Gwen laughed.

"No, no, Mr. Leone," she said. "That is not *Harlequinade's* idea at all."

"But you have been satisfied, madam? You have enjoyed your lunch? You found the service what you would desire?" Mr. Leone managed to convey the impression that he was deeply concerned about Gwen's judgment.

"Everything was excellent."

Mr. Leone sighed as if with intense relief.

"And now, madam, what can I do for you?" he asked. "But first—you have not had coffee. You will permit me to order it for you." He rang. "And perhaps madam would honour me—a very fine armagnac—for one or two special customers who appreciate such things . . ."

"That would be very nice," Gwen said. "Thank you, Mr. Leone."

Mr. Leone gave peremptory orders.

"And now," Gwen went on with an engaging smile. "I want to hear something about your guests. You have many interesting people who come here regularly, I understand."

Mr. Leone extended his hands once more.

"Everybody—everybody of real consequence comes here, madam. Of the intelligentsia, you understand. The situation, the effort they appreciate. But not the banal—the rich—we do not want them. They would not please our regular clientele."

No, no, no," Mr. Leone shook his head. "The Beach Hotel is a very unusual place. It is unique."

"So I have understood. Who have you here now, Mr. Leone?"

Mr. Leone shrugged his shoulders.

"At the moment? It is the holiday season. Many of our regular clients are abroad. But there is staying here——" He rattled off a list of some dozen well-known names and Gwen looked properly impressed.

Then, patiently, as she drank her coffee and sipped her liqueur she approached the matter which was the real reason of her visit.

"Mr. Leone," she said, as though the idea had just occurred to her, "your visitors' books must be very interesting. Might I see them?"

"Of course, madam." Once more Mr. Leone rang and issued sharp orders.

Gwen went on talking.

"You see one likes to get a particular angle on each hotel. Here it would seem to be that of personalities. That would interest our readers. As you say, your unusual clientele does make this hotel unique."

Mr. Leone purred. He was going to get some valuable publicity, in *Harlequinade*.

"Madam understands perfectly," he said, inclining his head. A waiter brought a couple of stout volumes and Gwen began to inspect them. It was mostly a perfunctory inspection, though she made many notes and commented appreciatively. Indeed some of the names did surprise her. Leone was right, he had an unusually brilliant list of visitors.

"Why even in the winter you have quite a lot of people," she said once.

Mr. Leone said, "Oh, yes. We are open all the year round. At winter week-ends we are always particularly busy. The air here in the winter is wonderful. It is a tonic in itself—like a fine champagne."

Gwen was busy making notes, but she murmured, "I shall try that tonic sometime."

She finished her task at last and Mr. Leone showed her all over his hotel and its grounds. Gwen hid her boredom, for Guilo Leone might be very useful to her later on, and he responded readily to her simulated enthusiasm of what she really thought was a very ugly hotel and in very bare surroundings.

"At any time you wish to stay with us you will be most welcome, madam," Mr. Leone said as he saw her off. "We will make you very comfortable."

Gwen expressed her thanks in a way that seemed to please Mr. Leone. He was almost obsequious. She felt that she had handled him successfully; she had wanted to make a good impression. Already she had gained some information which she wanted badly, and maybe Mr. Leone might provide some more later on.

Thoughtfully she drove back along that mile of lonely marsh road, all unconscious that from his room in the Beach Hotel, Mr. Gulio Leone was watching her car grow smaller and smaller in the hazy distance.

Presently he turned from the window and went to his private telephone. Mr. Leone's private telephone was not connected with the hotel exchange. He asked for a number.

When he was answered Mr. Leone spoke softly.

"Gulio speaking," he said. "I have had a Miss Gwendoline Darcy here. She came from *Harlequinade* to write about the hotel. She had copper-coloured hair. What? Oh, yes, she came from the paper all right; I read it regularly and she writes articles for it sometimes. . . . It is the same woman, you think? . . . No, she never mentioned her. . . . Yes, I thought you should know."

Mr. Leone rang off and returned to the affairs of the Beach Hotel, imperturbable, though perhaps with rather more melancholy expression than usual.

3

By a reed-thatched cottage, just where the marsh road begins to rise towards Whindleford village, Gwen slowed her car. A neatly dressed, plumpish woman standing at the gate had raised a hand to attract her attention.

The woman said, "Would you be kind enough to give me a lift into Whindleford, miss? I've had a puncture and if I walk I won't catch the Wilborough bus."

"Jump in at the back," Gwen said. "I'll drive you to Wilborough if you like. I'm going that way."

"That would be ever so kind if you would," the woman responded thankfully.

Gwen did not feel communicative. She had too much to think about. But for a few casual words she had no conversation with her passenger until they parted on Wilborough Market Hill.

The woman was very grateful. She would have nice time now to do a bit of shopping, she explained. Gwen said she was glad and left her with a pleasant smile to drive on to the Black Boy.

Nor was she more communicative with Hugh Merrow.

She passed him in the hall as she went to her room and he would have stopped, but she went on, agreeing with him that it was a very hot afternoon and calling back from the stairs, "I've been over to look at the sea."

Later in the cool of the evening Gwen went for a walk.

She ambled slowly along the Priory Lane to the bridge and there for some moments she stopped, leaning on the parapet, apparently regarding the peaceful little river flowing lazily on to the sea. Presently she crossed the stile and took the path through the woods by the river side. She was looking for something, and at last it seemed that she had found it.

For a long while she sat on the shady bank still watching the quiet stream. She moved onwards to stop once more opposite a bed of reeds by the further bank, the place where Janet Warren's body had been found. Then, slowly she retraced her steps.

At the corner of the lane, by the Black Boy, she saw a woman strolling idly. As she drew nearer she recognised her. She was the woman to whom she had given a lift that afternoon.

Gwen greeted her with surprise.

"I didn't expect to see you here," she said pleasantly when they met.

"No more didn't I expect to see you, miss," the woman said with an answering smile. "I came on from Wilborough by the bus."

"I might have driven you further if I'd known. I'm staying here at the Black Boy."

"Are you, miss. Why that's where I've come to. Mr. Pater-noster's my father. I was born and brought up here."

"Oh?" Gwen said. "And—er—do you live at Shingle-mouth?"

"Yes, miss. I work at the hotel there. I'm one of the cooks——"

"How long have you been there?"

"Over two years now."

"How very curious. I thought it such a charming hotel. And if you cooked my lunch, it was delightful."

The woman looked pleased.

"I'm glad you liked it, miss," she said.

"I did indeed. And—are you staying long here?"

"Just for the night, miss. I've got to be back by five to-morrow."

"Then you must tell me something about your interesting hotel while you're here. So unusual and—remote. It must be strange to live there all the year round." Gwen nodded in a friendly way and passed on.

She went to the office when she entered the inn. Merrow was inside and she beckoned to him.

"Oh, Hugh," she said. "Something very curious has happened and I want to talk to you about it. Could I see you for half an hour, quietly, after dinner?"

"Of course," he said. "Nothing serious, is it?" His mind had gone instantly to Janet Warren's bag.

"No, not really. Just rather curious," she said with an unconvincing smile. "After dinner then." She left him.

CHAPTER TEN

I

MERROW had become more and more convinced that the bag was the cause of Gwen's odd request. Something she had found in it was going to make trouble, and that was an infernal nuisance. He wished to heaven the wretched thing had never been found.

But he forced an air of cheerfulness when he went to his room with Gwen later that evening. He settled her in a chair with a cigarette and asked rather like a doctor seeking to reassure a patient, "Well, what's worrying you?"

Her answer was unexpected.

"Mr. Paternoster's daughter, the older one who's staying here to-night and works at the Shinglemouth hotel—what do you know about her, Hugh?"

He looked puzzled.

"Milly?" he said. "Why—I didn't know you knew her. Milly? I don't know that I know anything about her, except that she is Stephen's daughter. She married a policeman, who's dead, and she is a devilish good cook. I hope to get her for this place next Spring. But what exactly do you mean, Gwen?"

Merrow was impressed by the expression on the girl's face. She looked grim and worried and uncertain.

"I know it's going to sound all damned silly to you, but it's got to sound that way," she answered seriously. "I want advice. Is this woman Milly safe—I mean trustworthy. I want to ask her some unusual questions—in confidence—and I don't want her to talk about them to anyone else. Do you think I could do so? Or could you or her father speak to her before I do and impress her with how important it is?"

"About Miss Warren?" Merrow asked bluntly.

Gwen nodded. "It is as a matter of fact."

He was silent for a few moments.

"Yes. I should think so," he said at length. "Don't feel

like telling me anything more, do you? I don't want to press you if you'd rather not, but it might help."

"I do and I don't," she said frankly. "I didn't mean to but—I don't know—you'd probably hate it, or disapprove, but I think I shall." She raised her eyes slowly and fixed them steadily on his face. "I'm trying to find out why Janet came here to kill herself."

"Kill herself!" Merrow exclaimed.

"Yes. Of course. You never believed her death was accidental, did you?"

"But—the inquest."

"Inquest! Surely, Hugh, you weren't fooled by that? I thought it was plain to everybody, everybody with any sense, that we were all trying to save a scandal. The Coroner knew it, so did Mr. Baldock and Mr. Paternoster. They must have done. And as for the verdict, it was ridiculous. Accidental death! There wasn't a shred of evidence to support an accident. The best I hoped for was, 'Found Drowned.' But everybody was so terribly kind and considerate." She spoke with a note of cynicism. "I was. I was doing my best to gloss things over. But I wish I hadn't now."

"But why, Gwen? I don't follow you. I admit I thought she looked terribly strained——"

"Did you think she was mad?"

"No. No. Just queer—terribly worried."

"You knew she'd been drinking hard, didn't you. I got that out of Mr. Paternoster."

"Well, yes, he did mention it."

"For heaven's sake, Hugh, stop being so innocent and face the facts. I'm facing them. You thought in your own mind that she *had* committed suicide, didn't you?"

Her blunt words were effective. He stared perplexedly at the carpet for a few moments, then admitted, "Yes, I did."

"Why?"

"Well, if you must know, because at dinner that night she looked like a woman who had reached—passed even—absolute breaking point. She seemed in despair. Her drink bucked her up, but——" He shrugged his shoulders.

Gwen said in a low, tense voice: "Poor Jane!"

Merrow went on after a brief silence. "If you want the truth, both Paternoster and I thought you knew a deal more than you said at the inquest. But it was no affair of ours."

"I do want the truth and all the truth," she responded firmly.

"Who else has been talking about how much I knew?"

"No one, so far as I know: I haven't discussed the matter."

"Has anyone round here suggested that Janet killed herself?"

"I don't know. I haven't discussed it, I tell you. Paternoster may know. Baldock implied as much yesterday."

"Mr. Baldock—yes, I was pretty sure he didn't tell all he knew. I want to see him."

"But Gwen—if you knew—I mean—why did she do it? Was it drink, or wasn't she happy about Reggie Sudbourne? She looked so—despairing."

Gwen Darcy answered deliberately.

"I've never known Janet drink spirits in my life. She hated them. She hardly drank anything. She was madly in love with Reggie. She had, it seemed, all that she could ask for——"

"Then why did she kill herself?"

"Because she was being blackmailed, and there was something she couldn't face."

"Good God!" Merrow exclaimed slowly. "Being blackmailed! What had she done?"

"I don't know. And I don't care." Gwen spoke in the same deliberate way. "But I'm going to find out, and I'm going to find out who was responsible. It was murder—worse than murder."

"But—have you been. I mean, oughtn't you to go to the police?" Merrow was as shocked by the calm matter of fact way in which the girl spoke as by what she had told him.

"I have been to the police: I've been to Scotland Yard."

"What do they say?"

"That they can do nothing. In so many words, the woman's dead, a nasty scandal has died with her and that I'm very ill advised to try to stir up mud. They didn't put it quite so crudely as that, of course. Mr. Coles was very polite and sympathetic——"

"Mr. Coles?"

"He's the C.I.D. Inspector I saw there. He said if I could give them any definite proof of who the blackmailer was they'd take it up. But he obviously thought I was a completely misguided and interfering woman."

"But have you any proof?"

"No—not what they call proof."

"Then—but—I mean. After all, Gwen, if you can't prove anything, don't you think perhaps——"

"That the woman's dead and a nasty scandal has died with her and I'm very ill advised to stir up mud," she interrupted hotly. "No, I don't. That's Doctor Danvers' view too, and Mr. Kyson's, that's her lawyer, and apparently Mr. Merrow's. But it isn't mine. Perhaps there are other poor wretched women being tortured by this brute and I'm going to stop it if I can. That's going to be my memorial to Janet Warren, and it's going

to be a more worthy one than a stained glass window or a monument."

Still Merrow argued. The whole thing seemed wrong to him, it shook all his conventions.

"But think of her friends and relations, Gwen, if you dig up a scandal, I mean, if you're right she obviously preferred to die rather than have this business brought to light. You yourself said there was something she couldn't face."

"She had no relations, near relations, she told me so. I was her best friend—and——"

"There's Reggie Sudbourne."

"If Reggie Sudbourne doesn't want Janet's murderer punished then I don't care a damn for Reggie Sudbourne's feelings," she said angrily. "He couldn't have cared for her, and she did care for him. Anyhow, Hugh, I'm not asking you to mix yourself in it. It's my business and I'm going on with it. I wanted to be honest with you and not make up fatuous excuses for wanting to talk to Milly Paternoster—"

"Milly Claxton," he corrected her. "She's a widow."

"Well, Milly Claxton, then. But I do want the talk to be confidential. I asked for your advice and help. But, of course, if you'd rather not—I shall understand."

"Damn it all, you've no right to put it that way. I never said I'd rather not. I'm perfectly willing to help you all I can. But you can't wonder that I'm a bit staggered at what you've told me."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

"You haven't offended me."

Merrow was really badly ruffled. But a natural curiosity was growing in his mind, and unconsciously he was beginning to want to help the girl whether she was right or wrong.

Gwen said nothing, nor did he for some moments. Then, "You better tell me what you want to ask Milly before I advise," he went on.

"I want to ask her if she ever saw Janet when she was staying at the Shinglemouth hotel and I want to know if Janet had any friends there—particularly if she knew Frderick E. Charlton."

"Who's he?"

"I don't know, but I want to know."

"Why?"

"Because I found out to-day that every time Janet stayed at the Beach Hotel this man was there too. And I always felt sure that Shinglemouth was mixed up with Janet's trouble, and I'm certain of it now. She only told me that she'd been to Shinglemouth once before, that was just after last Easter. But now I know she was there in the winter when she said she was

in Bournemouth, and she was there two months ago—I've got the date—when she told me she was spending the night with someone in Gloucestershire. And each time this man Charlton was there at the hotel."

"I see," Merrow was recovering his poise. "And what's your idea; that he was mixed up with the blackmailing or what?"

"I don't know. If he was just an acquaintance, I could talk to him tactfully. If not—well, I've got to start somewhere—and I'm sure I'm right about Shinglemouth."

It all seemed very vague to Hugh Merrow, and rather futile. He wanted to ask a dozen questions, but they must wait. They'd better deal with Milly first. He considered for a while.

"Now about Milly Claxton," he said. "I've been thinking. If I were you, I wouldn't attempt to be confidential or make any mystery about it. She'll know who you are by now and you can bet there was any amount of talk about Miss Warren at the hotel, and she's been talking with her father and sister here too. It's only natural."

"Yes," she said, listening intently.

"Go to Milly in the ordinary way. Tell her that your friend, Miss Warren, used to stay at Shinglemouth and ask her if she remembers her. She probably won't, but she'll have heard the talk. Then you can lead up to what you want to find out. Don't you agree?"

"I do," Gwen said frankly. "I hadn't looked at it that way."

"Come on then; let's go and find Milly," he said.

2

Milly was out in the garden with Eve, Stephen Paternoster told Merrow, when he enquired.

Merrow said, "I want to have a word with her," and Stephen, thinking that Merrow was going to broach the subject of getting Milly as a cook for the Black Boy, added:

"This 'ud be a good time, sir; they've gone out to pick some peas."

As they went into the garden Merrow said, "Gwen, you've not told me yet how you knew Milly was at Shinglemouth. I'd better know."

She told him.

Presently they caught sight of the two girls. They were sitting on a wattle rustic seat at the edge of what had been a bowling green, and they began to move away when they saw Merrow and Gwen Darcy approaching. But Merrow called to them.

"Oh, Milly," he said, "Miss Darcy was telling me how she met you this afternoon, and she wants you to tell her something about the Beach Hotel. You know, of course, that she was a great friend of the poor lady who was drowned accidentally here a few weeks ago." Milly adopted a suitably mournful expression. "And that lady, Miss Warren, used to stay at the Beach sometimes. Miss Darcy wondered if you'd ever seen her there."

Milly answered, a little ill at ease, "No, sir, I can't say that I did, except once."

"But of course you heard about her. I dare say there was a lot of talk about her at the time. Only natural."

"Of course, sir, there was some talk. We was all ever so sorry."

"I'm sure you were," Gwen put in. "And I'd awfully like you to tell me something about her there—what she did and that sort of thing. You mustn't think it's going to—to hurt me. I just want to know all I can about her. I expect if you'd had a dear friend who'd died so suddenly and sadly, you'd like to know all you could about her."

Her words put Milly more at ease.

"Well, miss, I'm afraid I don't know much. I'm in the kitchen, you know. But Jules, that's one of the waiters, he said she was ever such a nice lady. But quiet and sad like."

"Yes, she would be. She used to go there for a rest when she was tired. She seemed to love the place. What did she do—all she ever told me was that she did nothing."

"She used to go walks, miss, at least so they said. Out along the beach all by herself. But there's lots of our visitors do that. I see them sometimes from the window. It's not like an ordinary hotel, not jolly and gay like, you know."

"No, I suppose not. But Miss Warren made some acquaintances there, I suppose."

Milly seemed mildly embarrassed. She looked down at the unkept grass and answered, "Not as I've heard, miss. Jules and the others said how she never hardly spoke to anyone. Used to sit reading and go to bed early—and never had drinks and things like the other visitors."

Merrow sensed something behind that answer, possibly a knowledge gleaned from Eve of Janet Warren's drinks at the Black Boy.

"You say you saw her once; when was that Milly? I'm sure Miss Darcy would like to hear," he said.

Milly's embarrassment increased.

"It was only just by chance, sir," she said. "It was—was that day."

"What day?"

"The—the day the poor lady—come here and—and was drowned." Tears welled up into Milly's dark eyes.

Merrow saw Gwen stiffen and start to exclaim, but he interrupted her.

"Of course, of course," he said blandly. "So you saw her then, did you?"

"Yes, sir. I did wonder if I hadn't ought to have said something but they all told me I'd better not. Mr. Leone wouldn't want the Beach Hotel mixed up in it, seeing nothing was said at the inquest about her being there."

"What was it, Milly—it couldn't have had anything to do with Miss Warren's accident."

"It hadn't, sir. That's what they said. I only saw the lady walking along the beach. It was my time off in the afternoon and it was terribly hot. I'd gone out to have a bathe a long way along the beach and I was lying on the shingle afterwards and I see the lady coming along. She passed close by me but she didn't see me, I was in a sort of hollow like, and presently a gentleman came along and spoke to her, and they sat down on the beach not far away and—talked—and it looked to me that they were quarrelling."

"Yes," Merrow said quietly.

"And then the lady got up sharp like and walked back looking ever so angry and the gentleman sat where he was for ten minutes, then he walked back. That was all, sir."

"Did you know the gentleman? I don't suppose they really were quarrelling, Milly."

"I didn't then. But I asked. He was Mr. Charlton. He's in business in London and sometimes comes down for a night or two for a rest, so he told Nora—that's a maid on the second floor."

"Well, Milly, I don't think you need worry yourself about that. But I'm going to leave you to talk to Miss Darcy a little more. Come along, Eve, show me how the peas are growing."

They strolled away and Merrow said, "Eve, tell your sister not to worry. There's no reason why she should have told anyone about the incident. And tell her not to tell anyone else. You know how people talk."

"I will, sir. But she hasn't. She told me, but she hasn't even told dad."

"Very wise too; it would only worry him. Now, Eve, I want to ask you something. Do you think Milly would come to be a cook here next spring? I don't want to influence her. But I'd pay her as much as she gets at the Beach and she'll have plenty of work to do."

"I think she'd love it, Mr. Merrow. She was only saying just now how the Beach was getting on her nerves; so lonely, especially in the winter."

"Tell her I'll talk to her about it before she goes to-morrow, Eve."

3

Gwen Darcy did not stay long with Milly. Merrow heard her say, "Thank you very much. It's been a sort of comfort to me to talk to you. You understand, don't you?" She left the girl with a grateful smile and called to Merrow.

"Oh, Hugh, I'd no idea you had such a big garden here; I'd like to walk round," she said.

He joined her. "Well?" he asked after a moment. "Did you get what you wanted out of her?"

Gwen said shortly, "Rather more than I expected."

They strolled on through a rough paddock to an orchard beyond.

"You heard her say Janet was at Shinglemouth that same day," Gwen went on. "She'd lunched there apparently."

"I heard. I'm surprised it didn't come out at the inquest somehow."

"So am I. But I don't quite know what to make of it. It looks as if she meant to stay at the Beach, as she told me, but changed her mind."

"Did she really engage a room there, I wonder?"

Gwen shook her head.

"If so, the hotel ought to have said something."

"Yes. Except, I suppose, if they weren't asked they'd just as soon not butt in. I wonder if they were asked. What about Charlton?"

"Not much," Gwen said. "Milly gave me a sketchy description. I lied and said I thought I'd heard Janet speak of him. I think she believed me—or wanted to. But I must trace him somehow."

"He ought to have said something," Merrow commented after a few moments.

"Not if he was the blackmailer. He was probably scared stiff when he heard what Janet had done. I wonder if it's any good tackling Leone?"

"Who's Leone?"

"The manager of the hotel. By his manner I think he'd hate to have a scandal connected with his hotel. I might try him: tell him I didn't intend to make anything public if he'd tell me what he knows about Charlton."

Merrow said, "Gwen, don't you think the time has come to tell me the facts. If I'm going to help you I must know everything. I've never heard of Leone. I don't know what you did at the hotel and I don't know what grounds you have for saying Miss Warren was blackmailed."

"I thought you didn't want to be dragged into it," Gwen said.

"Whether I do or don't I'm in it now," he retorted.

"Well, I went to the Beach Hotel because I had a hunch that Janet went there to meet someone. And I was right."

"But how did you find out?"

"From the hotel register. I told you I used to write for *Harlequinade*. I still do, and Martin Hale, the editor, is a good pal of mine. I got him to write to Leone to say that I was coming to do a notice of the hotel for the paper. Martin simply thought I wanted a free lunch." She smiled faintly. "I didn't get that but I got something I wanted more." And then she told him of her ruse and of her interview with Leone.

She told him more, too, speaking steadily and concisely as they paced slowly up and down beneath the trees as the mellow light of that summer evening began to fade and long before she had finished Hugh Merrow admitted what he had known for an hour past, that he was going to be in this business wherever it led him.

Merrow was undeniably a romantic, and the drama of Gwen's self-appointed task appealed to him. But he had a very clear and well-ordered brain, and when at last she had finished the story he told it back to her in his own form.

"Now I want to get this right," he said, and stopped, leaning against an old and gnarled apple tree while she sat on the lower bough that sprawled along a couple of feet from the grass. "The essential details as I see them are these. Janet Warren seemed perfectly happy and contented so long as you have known her; that's getting on for four years, until last winter soon after Reggie Sudbourne went abroad."

"Yes."

"And that was shortly after their engagement had been announced."

"About six weeks."

"Then she had the first of her sudden fits of depressions and went away unexpectedly. She told you to Bournemouth, but you know no—it was to Shinglemouth."

"That is so."

"You know now that she drew one hundred pounds from her bank before she went and when she came back she seemed more cheerful."

"Yes, but I realise now that there was a definite change in her from that moment."

He went on, summarising the details she had given him. On each of the occasions upon which Janet had gone to Shinglemouth she had drawn a similar sum of money from her bank. Then he came to what he called "that packet."

Gwen had found among Janet's private papers an envelope containing certain enclosures; a photograph and three typewritten notes bearing neither address nor signature, reading, Gwen said: "May we call your attention to our account which is now overdue. We shall be glad to receive cash payment in the course of the coming week, failing which we shall be compelled to take action in the matter, a course which we should very deeply regret."

"That seems obvious enough," Merrow said. "When she got demands she went off to Shinglemouth and paid up. But why the photograph?"

The photograph was a snapshot. Gwen described it as showing Janet dressed in the style of fully ten years before, standing in a cottage garden, a bunch of flowers in her hand. In the background was a whitewashed cottage and the top of a church tower showing over what was apparently a steep hill. In the cottage doorway, small and indistinct, were a man and a woman, and on the back of the print was typed "Helen West at home."

"What did you make of it, Gwen?" Merrow asked.

"I can't make anything of it, but I'm certain it's got to do with this affair."

"I quite agree with you," he said. "And I want to see that picture. We've got to dig back into Janet's life before we can start properly. I think that's more important than tracing Charlton."

"I'm not so sure. I think Charlton's most important. I'm not such a fool, Hugh, as to think I can tackle all this myself. What I want to do is to get evidence, facts, proofs to give to the police. They'll have to deal with it in the end. That's what I told the detective at Scotland Yard I'd do after he turned me down. And I'm going to."

Merrow did not argue the point; it would have done no good then, and they talked on while the velvety summer dusk deepened and the mist began to rise on the water meadows by the river. But as they strolled back to the inn he was more convinced than ever that he was right.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I

GWEN DARCY went back to London the next day. She had gone to get "that packet," the typed notes and the photograph.

Merrow had urged her to do nothing more until he had seen them, and particularly he advised caution.

"If we are to trace this man Charlton and find out anything about him he must not have any idea that anyone suspects him," he said, not so much because he thought Gwen would trace him but to gain time for himself.

He wanted to think quietly, set out his facts and draw his first logical conclusions from them. Before he went to bed that night he made a number of notes just as he had done when he had decided to buy the Black Boy inn.

The first note was one of which he had said nothing to Gwen, though the idea had come to his mind when he had heard Milly's story of Janet's meeting with Charlton.

He wrote, " ?—Was Charlton an old lover of Janet Warren's "

To him it seemed more than possible. Janet Warren herself was a mystery woman: Gwen knew practically nothing of her past life and the man might have had nothing whatever to do with what certainly appeared to be blackmail. Anyhow it was a point to be considered.

Then he made notes of the information he had been able to extract about Janet.

She was a lonely woman. She had many acquaintances but no intimate friends. She had studied in Paris but under what master Gwen did not know. She had been working for a time in New York before she came to London about seven years ago. She had begun in Chelsea as an unknown, in very modest circumstances.

She had made her first success with a portrait of Flora Wayne, the woman novelist, who had swept the painter of a portrait that she liked into the flood of her own well-organised publicity.

In the flow of commissions that followed that publicity Janet had had a minor breakdown, and it was Doctor Luke Danvers who attended her at the time, and also attended Gwen Darcy, who had brought the two women together. Gwen was earning a modest living as a journalist then and Janet had taken to her immediately and had made the suggestion that she should act as her secretary.

Janet, Gwen said, had been very good to her, but Merrow

judged that Gwen had been very good to Janet too. And, this seemed noteworthy, it was through Gwen that Janet had met her cousin, Reggie Sudbourn.

That was about as much as he knew, save for one thing, and that an important thing as Hugh Merrow saw it. Gwen made so little of it, but she admitted that once or twice Janet Warren had referred to an unhappy experience she had gone through. Gwen said that once Janet had been on the point of confiding in her, but she had not sought the confidence. Gwen believed it to have been some early romance, and she said, "I always did loathe having to hear about other people's love affairs, particularly when they've gone wrong. I'm afraid Janet may have thought me unsympathetic, but I couldn't help it, and it wouldn't have helped her."

Merrow wondered, as he put away his notes, whether Gwen might not have helped Janet Warren a lot had she listened.

2

Deliberately Merrow pushed Janet Warren's affairs to the back of his mind the next day. He had other things to concern him.

Stephen Paternoster told him in the morning that Milly had spoken to him about Merrow's suggestion that she should come to the Black Boy, and he thought that she liked the idea.

"She don't seem to be so happy as she used to be over at Shinglemouth," he said. "You have a word with her."

Merrow did, and received the same impression. Milly seemed more than ready to leave, and in the end it was arranged that she should come at the end of the season. Milly said she didn't mind if there wasn't a lot to do at first, she'd be glad of a rest and she'd like to be at home again.

When Milly left by the early afternoon bus Stephen went with her. He was paying one of his periodical visits to Wilborough—"To do a bit of shopping and have a look in at the pictures"—he explained to Merrow. And that left Merrow in charge of the Black Boy for the rest of the day.

Eve was quite capable of looking after the house, but Merrow took charge. It was the first time he had been left without Stephen and he welcomed the experience.

Things went smoothly. There were only a couple of visitors in the house that night and, after dinner, he told Eve that if she wanted to go out for an hour he would look after things.

Eve protested that there would be no one to serve the smoke room, which was the name by which the old private parlour had come to be known, if Tom was busy in the tap room.

But Merrow assured her, with a confidence that he did not entirely feel, that he could manage well enough. And he was pleased to discover that he could manage.

The smoke room had only a few customers, all regulars: Bob Ketton, Adams, the pork butcher from the village, Cummings, Baldock's man, two farmers, Dann from Monks Farm beyond the inn garden, and another whose name Merrow did not know. They drank slowly and methodically, and when Merrow answered the smoke room bell he found them generally discussing local affairs or local prices, still a little self-conscious of the new proprietor. Merrow stayed now and then chatting for a few minutes and was glad to find as the evening wore on that they were accepting him more readily.

The low ceilinged Tap at the back was busier, and once when Merrow looked in there to ask some questions of Tom he found it crowded and thick with smoke. The company amused him, mostly farm labourers; playing darts, or seated on rough settles, polished by years of use, chaffing noisily and drinking an incredible number of mugs of mild, or occasionally old and mild. Merrow had views on enlarging the Tap later on and making it more airy and comfortable for these tired men.

But there was one little fellow there who particularly interested him. Small, stumpy and beady eyed, with a shock of unkempt hair and a black stubble on his chin, he might have walked out of a canvas of Pieter Brughel's. He seemed to be the butt of the room.

Apropos something of which Merrow was ignorant a hulking young labourer threw at the little fellow, "But, Jim, you'd know all about that, wouldn't you?"

"I don't know nawthin' about it," the man responded petulently.

"Reckon you don't know nawthin' about nawthin' if I was to be asked," the first man retorted and raised a titter.

"Well you ain't asked, see. Wait till you be."

"Jim don't know nawthin' about rabbits, do 'e Jim?" someone else put in, and that brought a louder laugh.

"I knows what I knows and that's more than what some chaps does," the little man retaliated, and turned the laugh.

"Who's that fellow, Tom," Merrow asked when he and Self were outside the door.

Tom grinned. "The little 'un? Jim Bailey. He's a bit—you know, sir." Tom tapped his forehead. "The chaps are always baiting him."

"Not all there?"

"Well—a bit crazy like. Hasn't been about lately and the chaps are saying he's been in prison."

"Why; does he go to prison?"

Tom nodded mysteriously.

"He has been. You ask Harry Ling. He'll tell you. Gives him more trouble than anyone round here. And clever, cor! he's clever as a cartload of monkeys."

"You mean he's a poacher?"

"You're right, sir. But when you've said that you've said the worst. He's not a bad little chap if the others 'ud only leave him alone. But they won't. Then he flares out at 'em, specially if he's had a pint more'n he ought to."

A ringing bell warned Merrow that he was wanted in the parlour, and he went along there to receive an order for a whisky and soda from one of the two house guests, a sporting-looking parson on a walking tour, as he explained when Merrow brought his drink.

Then the smoke room called him again. It was nearing closing time and the regulars wanted their final drinks before turning out into the smooth warm night. It was while he was serving those drinks that the row in the Tap broke out.

Merrow heard rising voices, someone shouting with an oath, "Shut up, Syd" and Tom Self's peremptory, "That's enough of that now. You get outside, both of you."

Merrow knew that he would have been wise to leave the trouble to Tom to settle. He should have stayed in the smoke room, treating the matter lightly as the customers were doing. But he felt annoyed that there should be disorder in his inn—and on the first night he had been in sole charge.

He said sharply, "I must stop this," and went towards the tap room. Two of the customers followed him to see the fun.

In the middle of the stone floor the little man, Bailey, stood as if at bay facing Tom and the hulking young labourer who had been baiting him earlier in the evening.

"What have I done? It's him what started it, wasn't it? He ask me and I told him. He want to know who set they snares and he got his answer." Bailey's voice rose to a high pitched squeal. "He set 'em, I knows. And I knows something more what happened that night, and there's some as 'ud be very sorry if I was to tell what I knows."

"Now that'll do, Jim. Outside, I told you," Tom said firmly.

The labourer at the sight of Merrow in the doorway slunk off into the yard, but the little man was not to be stopped.

"If I was to tell——" he repeated shrilly.

"Have I got to put you out?"

The little man's fury evaporated suddenly.

"All right, Tom. I'm going. I'm going," he said submissively, and shuffled out.

Merrow had the sense to turn away. 'The trouble was over; Tom had handled it with the skill born of long experience, an experience Hugh Merrow realised that he would never possess.

Dann, the farmer, who with Cummings had followed him to the Tap, said with a laugh, "Jim Bailey again, making a nuisance of himself. Pity he doesn't go away and stay away."

Cummings put in, "Oh, I don't know. He's not a bad little chap. The guv'nor has him up at the Priory sometimes to give a hand with the rough work in the garden. He's a good worker. His trouble's beer."

"His trouble's laying his fingers on what don't belong to him," Dann said sceptically. "If you keep chickens you watch 'em, Mr. Cummings, or you'll find you're short of half a dozen one fine day."

"We don't," Cummings laughed. "The guv'nor don't like 'em, they make too much noise."

3

Tom Self made light of the incident when Merrow spoke of it after the customers had gone.

"Don't you worry your head about it, sir," he said. "It was my fault leaving the passage door open, do you'd never heard anything. But it was such a hot night. And it was all Syd Burrige's doing anyhow. Reckon it 'ud be as well to tell Syd he can go to the George in future. We don't want him here. He's a sight worse than little Jimmy Bailey."

"But what was it all about, Tom?" Merrow asked, though he was pretty sure of the answer.

"Why, sir, just chaff. They got talking about that inquest and what Harry Ling said about there being someone about the woods that night. Jim hasn't been about here since then, not till to-night, and they was pulling his leg about him being the chap Harry meant. But I doubt Jimmy was right and it was Syd Burrige that laid they snares."

"But he admitted he was about that night. And he suggested he saw something."

Tom grinned.

"What Jim Bailey have seen and what he couldn't tell if he liked 'ud make a book, sir. He's always like that. Very mysterious. That's why the chaps always chaff him. It's his way. It's often the way with little chaps. Makes 'em seem more important like. You see a lot of that sort of thing in a Tap."

Stephen Paternoster, who arrived from the late bus, agreed with Tom. He too seemed to like the little man despite his failings.

"I'll have a word with him next time I see him and tell him he's got to behave himself or go elsewhere. And he won't like that. Jimmy's never used another house in the parish for thirty years past. And his father before him. Poor little fellow, he's not quite all there and those who don't understand him don't like him. But like as not we shan't see him again for weeks."

Over a nightcap Merrow encouraged Stephen to talk about Jim Bailey. He was a strange character, he learned. His father had been a yeoman farmer in a small way in the adjoining parish of Haverly. He had come to grief many years ago and Jim, the only son, always a little weak in the head, had steadily gone down in the social scale. Yet the man still held a tiny freehold—a two-roomed cottage and a few rods of ground on the edge of Haverly Great Wood and no offer of Captain Sutton, the big landowner in Haverly, had ever been able to tempt him to sell. Merrow asked how Bailey lived. Stephen shrugged his shoulders.

Nobody knew. He poached. He bought and sold rubbish that most other people would have thrown away. He disappeared for weeks at a time and was seen on market days in distant towns, and he earned an odd shilling or two as an unofficial "vet."

"There's no one can handle pets: cats and dogs and birds, for that matter like Bailey," Stephen said. "If he'd only stuck to it he could earn quite a nice living, but he won't. We reckon round here that he's got a bit of money somewhere and that's why he won't work. Yet to hear him talk sometimes you'd think he hadn't a penny to bless himself with."

Again Stephen assured Merrow not to worry himself about Jim Bailey, but Merrow did.

Everything he had been told of the man might be true, yet he might have been in the woods that night when Janet Warren committed suicide. He might know something of her last moments. Merrow meant to have a tactful talk with Bailey at once; before he disappeared again "for weeks" as Stephen suggested that he might do.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I

ALTHOUGH it was getting on for midnight, Merrow was in no mood for bed. He felt restless.

"I'll lock up, Stephen," he said when Paternoster with a great yawn announced that he reckoned he'd be getting along upstairs. "I want a breath of air before I turn in. I've breathed too much smoke to-night."

"Very well, Mr. Merrow," Stephen responded. "There's only the front door to see to. I'll get along."

Merrow made a final round of the rooms to see that all lights were out and then went to the porch with the idea of sitting there for a quarter of an hour. But the night took hold of him.

It was still and warm and soft as velvet, with just a touch of mist in the air that turned the full moon to a ball of gold. Hatless, Merrow strolled slowly along Priory Lane, entranced by the beauty of the night.

He had the world to himself, a strange, unreal world of brilliant light and intense shadow. Presently he reached the bridge and stood leaning on the parapet watching the river like a stream of molten metal flowing by. By then his ears were becoming attuned to the queer noises of the night, the mysterious rustlings, the sudden twittering of some unseen bird, the whispering of leaves that died away as quickly as it began with some fitful puff of wind.

A great white owl drifted noiselessly past. Somewhere in the woods a pheasant cockled for a moment and beneath the bridge some beast splashed into the water. After a while he moved on, walking up the hill between dense mysterious walls of darkness that marked Haverly Great Wood.

He came at length to the open where wide corn fields stretched ahead, the ripe ears indefinably metallic in hue beneath the golden moon. And there by a gate he stopped and lit a pipe, feeling soothed and at peace.

Owls were setting up an eerie chorus as they hawked over the fields. From somewhere far away the faint scream of a railway engine whistle came to him, and there was the scent of earth and wood smoke in the night air. The pheasants grew noisy again and his ears caught a new sound, the soft crunch of cattle chewing the cud not far off. It was all very lovely, very restful, yet he felt more wide awake than ever.

Then of a sudden a shrill cry came from the woods; a human cry of unmistakable terror.

Merrow's skin felt cold and tingling. He tried to persuade himself that it was but the call of some marauding animal. But it came again, a wail that died in a choking gasp, and before he realised it he was running along a narrow path between growing wheat that seemed to lead towards the place from which that wail had come.

He was scared. The utter unexpectedness of that call of fear had got his nerves and he felt that he must run one way or the other, to it or from it.

The path wound towards the woods. A couple of hundred yards on he saw a building ahead, a tiny cottage with smoke rising lazily from its chimney—the wood smoke he had already smelt. But there was no light in the windows, no other sign of life. The gate to a ragged garden was open and he ran through calling, "Hallo there! What's the matter?"

Then at the door a man rushed roughly by him, pushing him aside. Before he could recover his balance he saw the fellow dash through the gate and turn for the woods. The noisy cockling of pheasants broke out again and Merrow was about to start in pursuit when another noise came to his ears.

Within the cottage someone was groaning.

2

Merrow pushed in. His first impression was of an inert body prone on the floor faintly lighted by the glow of a wood fire.

He spoke instinctively.

"What's the matter? Are you hurt?"

The body moved. Then a voice, which he recognised as Jim Bailey's, answered, "What do you want?" and the man painfully began to pick himself up.

Merrow ignored the question.

"Who was that man who ran out of here just now?" he demanded.

"Man?" the fellow answered dully. "What man? There weren't no man."

"Don't be a fool, Bailey; I saw him." Merrow spoke sharply, for the man's stupid denial annoyed him. He must be drunk.

Bailey started some answer, but broke off with a groan and swayed. Merrow caught him by his arm, fearing that he would fall, and helped him to a chair.

"Sit down there, man, while I get a light," he said, still sharply.

In the firelight he saw a lamp on the table. Clearly it had but recently been extinguished, for it was still warm. He lit it. And then he saw that drunk or sober Bailey had come by a

nasty looking injury. Blood was oozing from a gash over his temple. His lank hair was wet with it already and it was seeping down his face.

Bailey huddled in dazed fashion in his chair. Merrow was worried. This meant that he would have to get a doctor. But first he must patch the man up. He took the lamp and went into the adjoining room.

It was a small and stuffy bedroom. On its low cot bed a tumbled mass of bedclothes looked as if they had not been removed for months. But there was a bucket of water beside the rickety wash-stand. Merrow took it and the tin basin from the stand and with a towel he found there managed to wash Bailey's wound and fix up a makeshift bandage.

The man never spoke while Merrow was tending him; never offered a word of thanks nor of explanation, but when he had finished Bailey blurted out, "I hit me head against a tree."

"Hit your head against a tree be damned," Merrow said impatiently. "You were fighting and someone hit you. Who was it—that fellow Syd Burrige?"

"I ain't seen Syd Burrige. I hit me head against a tree," Bailey repeated stubbornly.

Bailey's persistence puzzled Merrow. He seemed sober. He wondered if he had lost his memory as the result of his injury. Loss of memory was a symptom of concussion. He tried again, speaking more kindly.

"No, no, Bailey," he said. "You must have forgotten. I heard you call out for help. I ran here, and as I came in at the gate a man ran out and nearly knocked me down. It was he who must have hit you. Who was he?"

"Man? There weren't no man here except you. If any man hit me it was you," Bailey answered. "Who are you, anyhow, and what are you doing here? I hit me head against a tree, I tell you."

Merrow swore irritably. The fellow was maddening; it was like talking to an imbecile.

"Tree or no tree you've had a serious blow and I'm going to get a doctor to you," he said after a moment.

"I don't want no doctor. I can look after myself. What's it got to do with you?"

Merrow shrugged his shoulders. He was beginning to wonder if he were not wasting his sympathy. Yet he couldn't leave the man like this, for he felt that he really was badly hurt, and after his angry retort Bailey had almost collapsed again.

"Whether you want him or not I'm going to get him," he said firmly. "And you'd better lie down till he comes. Come along now, I'll give you a hand to your bed."

Bailey half opened his eyes and regarded Merrow defiantly for a few moments. They were queer slits of eyes, sly, full of suspicion and fear. Then of a sudden the fellow's manner changed.

"I know you," he said slowly. "You're the new guv'nor up at the Black Boy."

"Yes. I'm the new owner. Now come on, Bailey, we'll soon have you fixed up again."

"I hit me head against a tree."

"Yes. Yes; so you told me, and I'm going to get Doctor Fenn to have a look at you."

Bailey hesitated for a couple of seconds, then submitted.

"All right; thank you, sir," he said, and allowed himself to be helped up into his frowsy bedroom.

"Now you stay quietly there till I come back," Merrow said, and Bailey nodded. Then he started along the field path, puzzled and uncertain, half thinking that he was a fool to take so much trouble over this strange bit of human wreckage, wondering if after all he had merely stumbled by chance upon a drunken brawl, yet growing more conscious all the while that there was something distinctly queer about the man's behaviour.

He reached the road and barely a hundred yards on his way he saw a bicycle's light approaching. A few moments later he recognised the voice of Hawes, the local constable, on night patrol.

3

Hawes jumped off his bicycle with a cheery "Good-night, sir. I was wondering who it was. Didn't expect to find you about this time of night."

Merrow said, "By gad, Hawes, I'm glad you've come along. Look here——" and he told him of what had happened.

The constable was interested, though he laughed, "Oh, little Jim Bailey, is it? He's a regular nuisance and no mistake. But you reckon he's really seriously hurt?"

"I'm afraid so. Anyhow I was going to ring up the doctor; but you're a First Aid Man. I suppose you'd better have a look at him."

"I'll have a look at him, sir. But Jimmy's tough, you know. You think he was fighting, do you?"

"I assumed it, because of the fellow who ran away. Bailey and a man called Burrige were quarrelling in the Tap at the Black Boy this evening and Tom cleared 'em out. I thought possibly they were continuing their scrap up here. But Bailey denies it and insists that he hit his head against a tree."

Hawes laughed again.

"Whatever Jimmy says you can bet it's a lie," he said. "But you can wash out Syd Burridge; he's been in trouble too."

"Oh?"

Come off his bike opposite the church just after half-past ten trying to get out of the way of a car. It was his own fault. I picked him up myself. He's sprained his ankle pretty badly. The doctor patched him up and took him home. Syd won't do any running for a week or two. No, you can wash out Syd. But let's get along and have a look at Jimmy, sir."

They had walked back to the gate. Hawes left his bicycle just inside and they went along the path together.

"I don't know whether you know it, sir," the constable went on, "but Jim Bailey's a funny little chap. There's some think he's not all there. He wants 'em to. Jimmy's no fool, sly and quick. I wouldn't like to put a name to who it was ran out when you went in, but I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't some chap who'd set some snares and Jim got there first. There's a lot of poaching round here."

"You mean Bailey robbed some other man's snares and got caught and that was what the row was about."

"Something like that. And I expect they thought it was me or Harry Ling when you came; that's why the other chap bolted."

"I see. Still, whoever it was caught Bailey an uncommon hard welt. I should say there's some concussion. He was pretty groggy. Damn near collapsed twice."

"Well, we'll soon know."

Once more Merrow went through the rickety gate. Then he stopped.

"Funny thing: he's put the lamp out," he said.

Hawes switched on his torch.

"You left it burning?" he asked.

"Yes—and by gad he's locked the door."

The constable tried it and agreed.

"That's funny," he said. "We'll have a look round the back."

But the door was locked there too.

Merrow said, "Hawes, I don't know what the law is but I'm going to get in somehow. Hope you won't have to run me in." He laughed feebly.

"That's all right, sir, for you. What about this window. You take my lamp."

Merrow got the window open and climbed in, calling to Bailey as he did so. But there was no answer. Nor was there any sign of the man in either room. The bed was in the same

disorder in which he had first found it, but there was no trace of wet or blood on the pillow to suggest that Bailey had lain on it. The fire still burned in the living room and the lamp was almost cold.

Merrow inspected both doors. Each had a sturdy lock which was turned. Bailey, it was clear, despite his injury, had bolted and he must have gone as soon as Merrow had left him. Merrow climbed out through the window by which he had entered.

"What do you make of it, Hawes?" he asked.

Hawes said bluntly, "Looks as if Jimmy's been up to something and didn't want any questions about it."

"But what are we going to do?"

"Nothing, sir; what can we do? I'll make a report, of course, but so far as I know the chap's done nothing wrong, and he can't have been as badly hurt as you think. It's him all over. I'll have a look round later on to-night and in the morning. But like as not we won't see him again for weeks and then if you was to ask him about it he'd swear he didn't know anything about it, or you or anything, and there you are."

Merrow saw that. He shrugged his shoulders. On the face of it he'd made rather a fool of himself and worse, he had driven Bailey away, and his chances of talking to the man and possibly finding out what he meant by his wild statements in the Tap of the Black Boy had gone, perhaps for ever.

The constable was peering in the open window, flashing his lamp about the untidy room. He interrupted Merrow's gloomy musings.

"You haven't left your hat behind, have you, sir?" he queried.

"Hat? No, I wasn't wearing one. Why?"

"I only thought that looked a bit too good for Jimmy," Hawes explained, directing the lamp's beam on a soft brown felt hat beneath the table.

"I never noticed that," Merrow said. "Let's have a look at it." He climbed in once more.

It was indeed quite a good hat, worn but still shapely. Merrow passed it out to the constable, who examined it with experienced eyes.

"Gentleman's hat," he pronounced it, and turned back the leather band. "Size seven, no name. London make, Heath. Now I wonder what that's doing there."

"Why, I imagine it belonged to the fellow who was scrapping with Bailey," Merrow said.

"Perhaps you're right, sir. If so he's lost a good hat. Would you mind putting it back where it came from. By rights we didn't ought to have disturbed it."

Merrow did as he was asked, but his curiosity was aroused.

"Can't you think of anyone it might belong to, can you, Hawes?" he asked.

"No, sir. Maybe Jimmy bought it at a Jumble somewhere. Anyhow it's none of our business," the constable said, and Merrow could not arouse him to further interest.

There was nothing to wait for. The incident had fizzled out, leaving Hugh Merrow feeling flat and foolish. They parted at the road gate.

"I'll let you know if I have any news," the constable said as he mounted his bicycle. "Good-night, sir."

"Good-night, Hawes. Sorry to have given you so much trouble for nothing."

"That's all right. All in the day's work."

Merrow walked in dejected mood back to the inn. He felt that Bailey's strange disappearance would never be explained, and he sensed that there was an explanation that was not that which Hawes had suggested. But he didn't look to hear from Hawes again for a long time.

Yet as he sat at breakfast next morning Eve told him that Mr. Hawes was "round at the back" and would like a word with him. Merrow hurried to the yard.

"Hallo, Hawes; got some news?" he asked eagerly.

"Not about Bailey, sir, but I thought I'd let you know. I had a nose round his cottage when I was coming back about half-past four and that hat had gone."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I

To Stephen Paternoster, Merrow made light of the incident. He found it easier to do so, for Hawes, apparently, was quite satisfied that Bailey had been engaged in nothing more than an ordinary brawl and that whoever owned the hat had come back for it.

Hugh Merrow, who had heard Bailey's first shrill cry of fear and had seen the man unconscious on the floor of his squalid room, was not so easily satisfied. But he could do nothing more about it. The policeman knew Jim Bailey's ways far better than he did and he *might* be right, Merrow tried to persuade himself. But he did not succeed.

Stephen's point of view was unexpected. Old Paternoster was solely concerned with the good name of the Black Boy;

as to why Jim Bailey had been fighting or whether he were badly injured or not appeared not to interest him at all.

"It don't do a house any good to get a name for quarrelsomeness," he said. "If anything serious had happened and it come out that the row started here it 'ud give the Black Boy a bad name, and that it's never had, Mr. Merrow. It's just as well Jimmy has cleared off and the longer he stays away the better I'll be pleased. As for Syd Burrige, he's going to be told straight he's not wanted here—that is, sir, of course if you agree," the old man added apologetically.

Merrow did agree, and to change the subject he passed Stephen a letter he had received that morning. It was from a London firm of hotel brokers, addressed to "The Proprietor, The Black Boy, Wilford." The firm stated that they had a client anxious to purchase a country hotel in the Wilford neighbourhood and that they, understanding that the Black Boy was in the market, would be glad to hear if the proprietor was prepared to sell, and if so would he furnish, in confidence, preliminary particulars. The letter concluded with the words, "Our client is prepared to pay an exceptionally good price for a suitable house and from information to hand we think that the Black Boy is exactly the type of premises that would suit him."

Merrow thought the letter probably the sort of thing every innkeeper received from time to time from agents anxious to get as many properties on their books as possible. He laughed as he handed it over to Stephen.

"Anyhow the Black Boy seems to have a good name still with someone," he said.

Old Paternoster frowned as he read. Then abruptly putting the letter aside he said:

"I'm disappointed in young Linton. He hasn't been acting straight, and I don't like it. No, I don't like it."

"Young Linton?" Merrow queried.

"You remember, sir. It was him that wanted me to sell the house to the Wilborough Brewery, and I thought he meant it."

"I don't quite follow, Stephen," Merrow said, surprised by the old man's gravity.

"Nor I don't wonder," Paternoster answered. "Never a word all the time he was crazing me to sell that it wasn't the brewery wanted it. Being him and him a partner naturally I never thought anything else. But I was wrong. And I'd still have been wrong if I hadn't run up against old Mr. Alfred Linton in Wilborough yesterday." Stephen leaned forward and spoke with a note of indignation.

"I'd been quite open and above board in all my dealings. I never promised it to young Linton, but from the letter he sent

me when I wrote and told him I'd decided to sell to you, you'd a thought I'd been underhand. I didn't like it, sir. I've had dealings with the Linton firm for forty years and they've got no cause to complain of me nor me of them. And I told Mr. Alfred that when I met him."

"Well," Merrow said, wondering what had happened to annoy Stephen so much.

"He told me the firm never knew nothing about it till the other day. Young Linton—young Mr. Leslie that is, he's Mr. Alfred's nephew—he was doing all the negotiations on his own, dealing with the letters and all, because of course I wrote to him. Mr. Alfred was right upset about it I can tell you, and he told me straight out that young Linton's left the firm. From what he said I reckon it 'twasn't the first time Mr. Leslie had been up to hanky panky. And now this," Stephen picked up the letter. "I reckon young Linton's behind it somewhere."

"But why, Stephen? What's he want with the place? And anyhow if he wants to buy why doesn't he come into the open and say so?"

"Don't ask me, sir. Unless he's buying for someone else. Like as not another firm—Bedworth's of Chipping Langham maybe, they're the big competitors of the Wilborough round these parts. Like as not when they saw how well the George in the village was doing they thought they'd like to have a house here too. And mine was the only Free House and they wanted to buy it."

Merrow was puzzled with these intricacies of brewer's rivalries.

"I see," he said vaguely, and Stephen went on:

"Or maybe he thought he might run it himself. You'll recall how he wanted me to stay on. I made a few enquiries at the Crown afterwards, you get all the Wilborough news there, and they tell me Mr. Leslie's been about with a London gentleman, a solicitor they say he is, and they seem to think maybe this London gentleman might be going to back him; pay the money, if you know what I mean, to get hold of a few houses cheap, do 'em up like the George and make a bid for the motoring trade. Of course that's only gossip, but I shouldn't wonder. It's surprising what they hear in the lounge at the Crown; everyone goes there, and when they've had one or two you'd be surprised how loose it makes their tongues."

"Who is this London solicitor?" Merrow asked. "Do you think he's put these people up to write this letter to me?"

"I shouldn't wonder. Not that I know anything about him. Name of Charlton I think they said he was."

"Charlton!" Merrow exclaimed.

"That's right, sir. Do you know the gentleman?"

"No. No. Never heard of him. I was only wondering if I caught the name right. Ah, well, Stephen, I don't think we'll sell." Merrow forced a hearty but utterly insincere laugh. "Young Linton will have to look somewhere else for his inn."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Mr. Merrow," Stephen said with simple sincerity.

2

An hour later Merrow was on the road, driving to London. He had decided to go within a few minutes of leaving Stephen.

He had telephoned to Gwen and caught her at her flat on the point of starting back to Wilford. To her and to Stephen he had told a vague story of an urgent business matter that had to be settled at once and Gwen had agreed to wait till he arrived. Stephen, if he felt any surprise at Merrow's impulsive decision had disguised it. "I can look after things all right, sir," was all he said, "and I dare say a little change'll do you good. I like to go away once in a while myself."

Merrow knew that he was giving way to impulse and impatience but he wanted to try to identify this man Charlton at once and he saw no way of doing so in Wilford.

But he might in London. His plan was to seek the aid of his old firm. Merrow, Webb and Copeland, Chartered Accountants, had their own efficient means of finding out the status and reputation of most professional or business people.

Merrow perfected his scheme as he drove. He could put it to old Webb, quite truthfully, that Charlton might be seeking to do business with him and he wanted to know something about him before negotiations were opened. He would ask Webb about the firm of hotel brokers, too, Hyland and Goring of Bishop Street Chambers. Far better to put his questions to Webb personally than to write, and the old boy could hardly refuse.

Webb did not refuse. Now that Merrow was out of the firm and no longer a source of irritation, John Webb thought only kindly of him.

He called him Hughie, as he did in the earlier days, and chaffed him about his new career, threatening to come down to the Black Boy for a week-end to see how he was getting along. But he became more serious when Merrow spoke of his business.

"You're quite right, Hughie," he said. "You'll save yourself a lot of trouble by finding out who you're dealing with before you begin to deal. It's often too late afterwards. Now what is it you want to know, my boy?"

"Everything I can about these people, Mr. Webb."

"That's a big order, Hughie, but we'll do our best. Charlton, you say? What are his first names?"

"Frederick E. A solicitor, I believe. That is to say he was described to me as one and as probably interested in the hotel business."

"And you think maybe there's something fishy about the fellow. Is that it?" Old Webb's eyebrows lifted.

"I won't say that. I don't know. But I want to know."

"Quite right. You're your father's son in some ways. Now these other people?"

Merrow showed Webb the letter, and the old man nodded.

"I see," he said approvingly. "You've got a chance to sell at a profit. Indeed, I wish you well of your deal. It seems you've found your right walk in life. All right, Hughie, we'll do our best. It will take a day or two perhaps as you know. But we will do our best."

Merrow left the office with a friendlier feeling for old John Webb than he had known for many years. He drove on to his club and telephoned Gwen again.

"What about dinner to-night. I know a quiet place where we can talk, and I've got some news for you," he said.

"I'd love to, Hugh," she answered.

"Right. Quarter to eight at Dorani's. And bring those papers with you."

3

Dorani's is a small, expensive and extremely good little restaurant in a backwater off Jermyn Street. It is famed for its theatre dinners and it was already beginning to empty when Merrow saw Gwen coming through its white swing doors.

He had engaged a corner table, where they would be little disturbed by other diners, and neither of them spoke of Charlton or Janet Warren or any of the tangled business that had brought them together, at first.

Merrow ordered cocktails, then consulting the Carte, he said lightly, "I want this to be rather a specially good dinner, Gwen, just to show you the sort of thing I'm going to do at the Black Boy one day, and, and also because I think we've made a start."

"Have we?" She smiled. "You may have. I haven't. I've just run against a brick wall."

"Never mind that now; what about a grouse?"

"Love it."

"And a little Fillet de Sole Dorani, that's the speciality of

the house, done with white wine, mushrooms and things. Then you can choose your sweet later."

She nodded.

"You're the hotelier: I'm in your hands and they seem very competent."

"Then I suggest a young hock, to start with anyway?"

"Divine," she said.

He gave the order and they settled down to the hors d'ouvres, and for a time they talked about the Black Boy half seriously, half jestingly. Merrow asked her to undertake the decorations of the bedrooms for him.

"If I'm an hotelier you're an expert interior decorator, Gwen: I'll give you the job," he laughed and she took that seriously.

"It would be fascinating," she said. "I've got ideas already."

They were still discussing her schemes and ideas when the sweet was served. Then, as they sat waiting for their coffee, Merrow said quietly:

"I think I've got a line on that man Charlton."

"What?" she exclaimed. "Hugh—really?"

"I think so."

"How on earth did you do it? That's what has been depressing me so. I thought I might be able to trace him through directories and reference books. I've spent hours going through them. There seem to be hundreds of Charltons but not a single Frederick E. Tell me, please."

He told her the brief story, and of how he had asked his firm to pursue the matter, and added, "Now we must be patient for a bit and see what happens."

Gwen did not reply for some moments. She sat staring down at the table, frowning and perplexed as though she were trying to work out some problem. At length, speaking in a hesitant way, she said: "Hugh, I expect you'll think I'm—idiotic, but—I don't know—I can't explain it—but—I believe there's something more, more significant behind this than we think. What I mean is I've always wanted to know why Janet came to the Black Boy. I've always felt it wasn't just chance. And somehow this man Charlton makes a sort of link. Silly, aren't I?" She forced a feeble smile.

"Not a bit, Gwen. I agree in way, but what exactly have you in mind?"

"I can't explain it. It's a hunch more than anything else, like my feeling about Shinglemouth. But—I've never told you before because I suppose I thought you wouldn't like it. But the Black Boy is the last place in the world I should have expected her to go. She loathed everything old, old houses, old

pictures—everything. It was an obsession with her. She hated the country, really, and gardens. She doesn't know a thing about them. She was the most terribly modern urban person I ever knew. And yet she came to an old inn and pretended to be interested in gardens to Mr. Baldock. There's a reason for it somewhere. If she was just going to kill herself why didn't she do it at Shinglemouth along that terribly lonely beach there. There was no one to see. And then her drinking like that. It doesn't fit, Hugh. I'm sure, but—I'm sort of groping."

He listened to her intently, feeling that there was something in what she was trying to express: a sense of the sinister, of unknown, uncomprehended things going on, all of which had a bearing on Janet's tragic death. And they did somehow seem to centre about the Black Boy. Things to which there was a clue somewhere.

And his practical mind told him that the clue was in Janet herself, in her past life. If they could find the cause of her troubles they could more easily understand its effects.

He put that point of view frankly to Gwen.

"I'm sure it's best to start at the beginning," he urged, and she agreed, if reluctantly.

And then she showed him the photograph.

4

At first glance it did not seem very hopeful; a small enlargement of a snapshot obviously, very clear and detailed with, as she had already told him, the words "Helen West at Home" typed on the back. He studied the print with care while Gwen smoked in silence. He wanted to get every detail of it into his mind before he offered any comment, and he found that he was concentrating more on the background than on the three figures it portrayed.

If he could by any chance discover where that picture was taken it would help tremendously to solve the problem.

There was the cottage, old, white-walled and thatched roofed, set in a simple old-fashioned garden. A pretty cottage, too, the sort of thing you saw on almanacks and Christmas cards, with a rustic porch and a big chimney at one end. Beyond it showing over the top of what seemed to be a steep drop, was a church tower.

After a time Merrow regarded the figures more carefully: Janet in the foreground looking oddly old-fashioned with a bunch of roses, they seemed to be, carried carelessly.

That seemed rather at variance with Gwen's statement that she hated gardens. He would raise that point presently. Mean-

while he concentrated on Janet's face. It looked strained, the face of an ill woman, or a very sad woman smiling because she was told to smile.

Then the two figures in the background, smaller but pin sharp. With a glass one should be able to recognise them clearly. A tall woman in a white dress, her hands clasped in front of her. She had the indefinable attitude of a dependent; an upper servant, perhaps, or housekeeper.

Even without a glass he could distinguish her sharp features, a prominent nose and firm mouth. She looked a bit of a dragon.

The other, a man, was in baggy knickerbockers, his back half turned to the camera. Shortish, sturdy and apparently bearded.

Merrow's eyes went to the far background. He had the impression of a hilly country. There was a faint line that might have been cloud but looked to him more like the ridge of distant downland. But the church tower was clear enough and upon that suddenly he fixed with particular intent.

There was something odd about it. He saw what it was a moment later. It was round, with what was apparently a wind vane erected on one side so that the whole tower looked lop-sided.

He called to a waiter.

"Could you get me a magnifying glass, do you think?" he asked.

"A magnifying glass, sir. I will enquire."

Gwen came out of her moody thoughts to ask, "Why do you want a glass, Hugh?"

"Because," he said, "if what I think I see here is right, by a stupendous bit of luck I think I can find out where this picture was taken."

5

The bit of luck was Anthony Whittington, the prize bore at Merrow's club. Normally Merrow avoided him like the plague.

Whittington was a melancholy elderly architect with an obsession for old churches. He wrote books about them, he restored them, he wrote letters to *The Times* about them, and you couldn't be in his company for five minutes before he began some prosy story about his latest find or example of "deplorable vandalism"—which meant that some other architect was restoring an ancient church he wanted to restore—and he had a dreary, mumbling soul-killing voice that drove the other members to distraction.

Yet Hugh Merrow deliberately sought him out in the club

library later that night. Whittington was browsing over some technical journal. He roused when Merrow addressed him and began at once a prosy dissertation.

"Just reading about a Saxon crypt some fellow thinks he's discovered at Kindal Morton. Lot of rubbish. It isn't Saxon at all. Not a stone of it put in place a year earlier than eleven hundred—probably later. I know it well. These ignoramuses! Now I remember once about five years ago, no I think it was four. I know it was a very hot summer and——" He droned on while Hugh Merrow did his best to make suitable comments.

But even Whittington's stories came to an end at last. Then Merrow thrust the photograph at him.

"I've been wanting to ask you about this," he said brightly. "Most curious looking tower. Looks round to me. Can't be a church tower, can it? But you'll know, of course."

"Why shouldn't a church tower be round?" Whittington was feeling in his pocket for a stronger pair of glasses. "I could name a dozen or more off-hand. In the eastern counties mostly. You find them in a flint country. Now what's this one?" He peered. "That—yes, that's a church tower all right. That's—that's—I've got it. I was thinking at first it was Embury St. Mary, that's near Bury. I remember once——"

Merrow cut into him.

"Not Embury, you say? Where is it then?"

"That's Chaldean, or I'm very much mistaken. Yes, Chaldean." He fixed Merrow with a glassy eye. "A most interesting example, the only one in that part of the country, unless of course——"

"But where is Chaldean, Whittington? East Anglia?"

"No, no. It's in Hampshire, in the Downs. You see, as I was saying you find these round towers in a flint country, and——"

"I say, I wonder if you'd forgive me for a moment, Whittington. I'm expecting a phone call and I think they're looking for me. Damned interesting, all this. You must tell me about it later. Thanks so much."

Merrow fled; to the telephone box in the hall. He rang Gwen at her flat.

"Hallo. Hugh speaking," he said. "Hope you hadn't gone to bed, but I thought you'd like to know I've traced it. Place called Chaldean in Hampshire. I'm going down there tomorrow first thing and I'll give you a ring as soon as I get back."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I

HE MADE an early start. By ten o'clock he was pretty well clear of the London traffic, driving hard along the Portsmouth road. Before noon he came by a narrow road that wound through a fold high up in the great whale-back Downs beyond Petersfield to a solitary sign-post. It pointed to an even narrower, rougher track that climbed the open sun-scorched down and announced in weather-worn letters "Chaldean $\frac{3}{4}$ -m."

Merrow changed gear to take the sharp rise, but he stopped at the top where the road dropped as steeply to a cluster of white walled houses set about a little round-towered church, and he looked on Chaldean.

It seemed immensely remote, a forgotten little village lost in the solitude of the bare rolling downs, and, as carefully he began the descent, he was wondering what it would have to tell him.

He stopped again a minute later, for at a sharp turn in the road, he came upon the cottage of the photograph.

There was no mistaking it. The ground behind dropped steeply and there was the top of the church tower showing above it. It was shabby. There was an untidy chicken run along one side of the garden and a roughly written notice fixed to the gate told that "Teas and Minerals" could be had within.

Merrow decided at once. He pulled the car into the bank and entered the garden.

A young flashily-dressed, be-lipsticked woman came to the open door as he went up the path. Merrow said, "Good-morning. Have you got any ginger beer?"

The woman nodded.

"Stone ginger; yes, sir. Would you like to 'ave it in the garden?" She indicated an iron table with a few cheap chairs about it, set under an ancient apple tree.

Merrow agreed and sat waiting and wondering.

The woman's voice was of the towns; so were her dress and manner; a newcomer probably who would have no memories of the cottage ten years and more ago. And she seemed so utterly out of place with her cheap tawdry finery in this remote place. She depressed him. But he tried to get her to talk when she brought his drink. She might know something.

He began with a comment on the prettiness of the situation, and she agreed half-heartedly.

"You don't get a lot of people here, I suppose," he went on.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "We don't do too bad. It's early yet. Mostly 'ikers. You'd be surprised what a lot of 'iking there is. They come to see the church. Got a round tower and supposed to be very special. Like a picture post card of it?"

"I would before I go. As a matter of fact I came to see the church. I had a friend who used to know this place years ago and told me about it. Have you been here long?"

"Me—no." She threw away a cigarette she had been smoking and Merrow offered another. She took it with a friendly "Ta."

"Me; I wouldn't like to live 'ere, would you? Not always, I mean. My 'ome's Pompey—that's Portsmouth. I've just come out to 'ave a week or two's 'oliday while my 'usband's away, and I give Mrs. Boon a 'and like. But I shouldn't like to live 'ere. Give me the creeps."

"Pretty lonely in the winter, I should think, if you're not used to it."

"You've said it," she laughed.

"But I suppose Mrs. Boon's used to it."

"She—gawd, yes. She's lived 'ere all 'er life."

"What, not in this cottage?"

"No. She ain't been 'ere more'n three or four years. There was a doctor used to live 'ere before that. Not an ordinary doctor, if you know what I mean, but a London chap: Doctor Argent. 'E used to come down for the week-end and all that. But some years 'e wouldn't come more'n once or twice, sometimes not at all. Mrs. Boon—Ma, I calls her—used to come in to oblige when 'e did come down and when 'e give it up she bought it off 'im, so she tells me."

"Was he here long?" Merrow asked casually.

"Ma 'ud know: I don't. But I think so, because she'd been obliging 'im for a year or two I do know. I'll ask 'er if you like."

"Do," Merrow said. "And bring me some post cards."

The woman lunged away and Merrow's eyes followed her. She was a vulgar, sophisticated little thing who might have been pretty if she hadn't messed herself up with bad make-up and cheap flashy clothes. But she had been useful, and "Ma," with a bit of luck, was going to be more useful. Hurriedly he devised a lie to tell "Ma" if it were necessary.

2

She came out to him alone; a plump, homely body. She was all smiles and she gave him a heaven-sent opportunity.

"Good-morning, sir," she said. "Are you the gentleman Lil says used to know Doctor Argent?"

"Well, no. I can't say that," Merrow replied. "But I had a friend who knew this cottage years ago, but whether that was in Doctor Argent's time, I'm not sure. I have a picture of the place if you'd like to see it."

"Why, thank you, sir," Mrs. Boon wiped her hands on her apron, and he produced the photograph. She took it and a reminiscent smile spread slowly over her rubicund face.

"If it isn't poor Miss West," she said. "Fancy that now, after all these years. Such a nice young lady, poor dear. How is she, sir? Is she——" She hesitated.

"She's dead," Merrow said.

"I was afraid so," Mrs. Boon shook her head lugubriously. "What was it, sir—the old trouble?"

"No. She died accidentally."

"Well, I *am* glad to hear that. And did she get all right. He, the doctor, always said she would, but I had me doubts." Again the lugubrious shake of her head. "When they get it bad as that they don't often."

"What was her trouble," Merrow asked suddenly. "I only knew her very slightly and she never spoke of it."

"Didn't you know? Well, the doctor he always called it a nervous breakdown—but we knew what it was in the village. You couldn't help it."

"What?" Merrow tried to keep his intense curiosity out of his voice.

The woman raised her arm in the motion of drinking.

"I mean," she said, "Mr. Elphick at the Crown he was asked not to serve her. Nor he didn't, the poor young thing. Couldn't hardly have been more than one and twenty. Very sad, I call it. Like a disease. But she did get over it after all, you say?"

Merrow said dully, "Yes, she got over it," though he was wondering as he spoke if she had. For this revelation seemed to make so many obscure things clearer.

Janet Warren a dipsomaniac explained much—her moods, her abrupt disappearances. He recalled how at first he had thought that drink was her trouble yet he had never suspected this.

He said, "Mrs. Boon, I wonder if you'd tell me a little more about Miss West's life here. She's dead now and—well, a very dear friend of hers is a friend of mine and I think she'd like to know."

It was a vague and unconvincing reason but it satisfied Mrs. Boon.

"I can't tell you a lot, sir," she said, "except the poor young thing came down here to the doctor's cottage with a nurse, Miss

Marshall, and it was give out that she was a friend of the doctor's as had had a bad illness and had got this nervous breakdown. And about two nights afterwards she goes into the Crown just before closing time and buys a bottle of whisky. Mr. Elphick, he didn't think much of it until Miss Marshall knocks him up to know if the young lady's been there, and they finds her early next morning sleeping in Bolt's Wood and the bottle empty."

"How very sad," Merrow said.

"That it was, sir. We was all sorry : it's not like a chap getting drunk and all that. But her, a young lady ! And that wasn't the only time. Of course Mr. Elphick wouldn't serve her again after that, and sometimes she'd offer the chaps and the children money to go and get it for her. But Mr. Elphick soon tumbled to that. Then for weeks she'd be all right until you heard she'd got away again and got it at the Plough at Hurstholt, or the King's Head over at Little Penleigh—that's six miles away—and once she was picked up by the police in Paulton Market, so bad, sir, she couldn't stand."

Merrow was badly shocked. This story was a horrible one and he would gladly have heard no more of it. But he had to go on.

"And yet in the end, Mrs. Boon, she got over it," he said.

"That's a real comfort to me to know that, sir. It just shows. Doctor Argent must have been a very clever man."

"He must have been. How long ago was it she was here ?"

"Why, it 'ud be eleven or twelve years quite. I know my Alfie left school while she was here. That 'ud make him fourteen and he's twenty-six now."

While they were talking the girl had returned from the cottage and stood listening, a bunch of post cards in her hands. Merrow felt that he could not continue discussing Janet's tragedy before her too, and he asked casually if Mrs. Boon recognised the figures in the background of the photograph.

She screwed up her eyes.

"Why, yes, sir," she said. "That's Nurse Marshall and very good it is of her too, if it is small. And so it is of the doctor, though it's a pity he's got his face turned away. Such a nice face he had, so kind."

"Let's 'ave a look, Ma," the girl said, and taking the print stared at it for some moments. But her only comment was "Cor ! Funny looking clothes, aren't they. But I do like the way 'er 'air's done. Suits 'er style."

Merrow had heard enough. He took back the picture and returned it to his pocket. Then dismissing the subject in vague terms he began to inspect the post cards, asking questions about the church and the village.

Presently he finished his drink, paid what he owed and left them, saying with stupid heartiness, "I must look in again next time I come to Chaldean."

"That's right, sir," Mrs. Boon said, smiling. "Always glad to see you."

The girl, lighting another cigarette, said cheerily, "Bye bye."

3

Over bread and cheese and a pint of beer Merrow picked up a few more details about Doctor Argent at the "Crown." Elphick had gone and the new landlord had mere hearsay to retail. But he had heard of the doctor.

"Used to have a sort of home at one time in that cottage top of the hill," he said. "Funny old things going on there, too, sometimes from what I've heard. Dottles and drunks, if you know what I mean, sir. But I'm glad it's gone now. You don't want that sort of place in a village—sets a bad example."

By patient questioning Merrow discovered as much as he could about the residents of the neighbourhood. There were no, what the landlord called, gentry living in the village, and but for a couple of week-end cottages owned by townsfolk who had come in his time the inhabitants were all farmers or engaged on the land.

Merrow asked about the parson, but Horne, the landlord, told him that he too was a newcomer who lived at Hurstholt, a village three miles off, and that when the old rector died last year the two parishes had been united.

There was nothing more to be done at the moment. He had discovered much—a sad and tragic much—and on his drive back to London he sorted out his information in his mind and realised that though he might know Janet Warren's terrible story he was no nearer tracing a man called Charlton nor discovering by whom and how she had been blackmailed.

Why, was pretty obvious. He probably had heard but a small part of Janet's history. If when she was supposed to be under control she could be found by the police in a market town hopelessly drunk there were doubtless even less savoury incidents in her past.

And someone knew of the incidents. Somebody knew the whole sordid story and had threatened to expose her unless she paid.

The filthy scheme became clearer. Janet had undoubtedly been cured of her dipsomania or she could never have succeeded as she had done in her art. She had changed her name and

identity. The drink-sodden Helen West had died and an accomplished painter, Janet Warren, had been born.

Yet the somebody who knew all this had waited his time until he could best capitalize his knowledge. And, quite clearly, that time had come when Janet's engagement had been announced. It was then for the first time, as Gwen had said, that Janet had received the blackmailer's demand.

But who was the somebody? Who could have exploited the wretched story?

Doctor Argent? Nurse Marshall? Surely both of them would be above suspicion. Of course everyone in Chaldean and probably many people in the neighbourhood knew of her trouble when she was at the cottage, but would they know of her change of name and identity? That must have been made very carefully. And anyhow, as Merrow saw it, country folk were not skilled in the art of blackmail, and Janet's persecutor was undoubtedly a cunning and experienced man.

Charlton? How did he come into it? Merrow should have asked if the name were known round Chaldean. But old Webb might have news to help him there. Of course Janet must have had friends in her past life. Disreputable friends too. It was among them that he would probably find the man he was seeking. But how was he to get knowledge of those friends of twelve years and more ago?

There seemed but one answer to that question. He gave that answer to Gwen Darcy when late that afternoon he sat talking to her in her flat in a quiet old-fashioned street off the Brompton Road.

Gwen, looking inexpressibly sad as she listened to his painful story, said:

"Whatever friends she may have had then I know she cut entirely free of them. I saw everyone who came to see her. And now I understand why she never spoke of any relations or of any friends of her past. I sometimes wondered why—but it's so obvious now. But one thing, Hugh, I can swear to. She was cured and absolutely cured. I never saw a sign of anything, and I told you, she loathed spirits. And she only went back to them at the very end. I wonder who this doctor was, and how she knew him.

"That's what you've got to go and ask him, Gwen," Merrow said. "He's our only chance. We must find him and you must make him tell."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I

"WE MUST find him" had seemed an easy task to Merrow when he spoke. But when he made the first obvious attempt to do so, it began to present difficulties.

He started with the London telephone directory, and found there four Doctor Argents, and none of them might be the man they sought. Indeed, as he began to realise then, the Argent of Chaldean might not still be alive.

More snags arose. How was Gwen to approach these doctors? She could hardly call on a complete stranger and say, "Did you treat Helen West for dipsomania twelve years ago?" No reputable doctor would listen to her if she did.

Gwen saw that point and made a suggestion.

"I'm going to ask Doctor Danvers," she said. "He was very fond of Janet, and I told him what I was going to do, and though he tried to put me off I don't see that he can very well refuse to help. I'm going to ask him anyhow." Her hand went out to the telephone.

It seemed a sound idea to Merrow and he listened while she spoke over the wire.

"I want you to help me," she said bluntly. "What?—No, I can't explain on the 'phone but may I come round? Yes, now—And I'm going to bring an old friend with me, Mr. Merrow—Yes—Thank you so much, we'll come at once."

They were at Danvers' house ten minutes later.

Doctor Luke Danvers in his consulting room in a gaunt Victorian house in Turner Square, Chelsea, struck Merrow as being even more pedantic and old-fashioned than he had done giving evidence in the Village Hall at Wilford. And though stiffly courteous, he seemed ill at ease.

Clearly he couldn't understand why Gwen had brought him, and her introduction: "This is Hugh Merrow who owns the Black Boy at Wilford, where poor Janet went before she killed herself" did not make him any more easy, though Gwen did add, "I've known Hugh for years and I went to school with his sister."

Luke Danvers bowed formally and waited with patient apprehension to learn the reason of her visit.

Gwen began at once with a bombshell that startled Merrow as much as it did the doctor. But he realised a few minutes later that Gwen's tactics were good. The utter candour of her unexpected attack shook the doctor's long cultivated professional

caution. She said, "Doctor, it's about Janet. Did you know she'd been a dipsomaniac?"

Luke Danvers jumped as though he'd been shot. He flushed and stammered:

"Re-re-really, Miss Darcy! Re-re-really! What a terrible thing to say! What on earth could have made you make such an outrageous statement?"

"But it's true, doctor: perfectly true. I only wondered if you knew it. I didn't until this afternoon. Hugh found out."

"I refuse to credit the statement and I refuse to discuss it," the doctor said, still shaken and perturbed. "And I cannot understand, sir, why you should seek to denigrate the name of an unhappy and distinguished lady who was both a friend of mine and of this lady's." He turned a pair of angry eyes on Hugh Merrow.

Unconsciously Merrow followed Gwen's method.

"It is a fact, sir," he said shortly. "It is no question of blackening the lady's name. I made the discovery at Miss Darcy's request—Gwen, you'd better explain."

Danvers looked furious.

"Yes, I think it does need explanation," he said acidly.

Gwen was unruffled.

"I felt certain you didn't know, doctor, and I'm sure I never suspected it. And what's more she was cured. But I've got to find the man who cured her. He was a Doctor Argent. I want you to help me find him."

Again the old man was startled.

"This is preposterous," he said. "And let me tell you again, young lady, I can see that you are determined to persist in your regrettable—er—obsession, and I deprecate it most strongly."

"I know you do, doctor. But you're wrong, and I'm going on with it. And if you can help it will make it that much easier. Otherwise I shall have to call on every Doctor Argent there is till I find him."

"But—but—but surely you don't want to spread this—this infamous libel on our dear, dead friend——"

"Nothing can hurt Janet now," the girl interrupted quietly. "But that's what I'm going to do. I've got to know all the facts, you see."

"No, I don't," the doctor snapped. "And I can tell you this, no medical man would discuss his patients with you, so you'll be wasting your time."

He had walked over to the window and stood, hands behind his back, gazing with annoyed expression at the parched foliage in the square. Presently he swung round and spoke more calmly:

"What grounds have you for making this deplorable allegation?" he asked.

"Mr. Merrow can tell you, doctor," Gwen said, and Merrow told him.

Luke Danvers listened, frowning. But he was regaining his poise.

"If your information be true, sir, the story were far better forgotten," he said. "Nothing but harm can come from raking up the ashes of this dead tragedy. That is my considered opinion and I express it most gravely."

Gwen put in patiently, "Doctor Danvers, need we go into that again? Somebody drove Janet to kill herself and I'm going to do my best to see that he drives no other miserable woman to death."

"Sentimental twaddle!" Danvers exclaimed. "A most deplorable public scandal has been averted and need never be made known but for your, your incomprehensible desire to—er—fling it to the world, Miss Darcy. I have to speak plainly, but it would appear that my feelings are not to be considered nor my advice taken."

"I'm sorry, doctor, but I'm going on."

"Very well. All I can do then is, at least, to prevent your spreading this horrible story unnecessarily. If Mr. Merrow's gossip has any foundation the most likely man for you to approach is Sir Philip Argent. But I warn you, he will not discuss the matter with you; I doubt indeed if he would admit any knowledge of Miss Warren if he possessed it."

Merrow broke in. "That's easily checked, Doctor Danvers. I have only to run down to Chaldean again and find his name and address, probably. If I hadn't been a fool and rather shocked by what I heard I would have got the details to-day."

Danvers snorted. "That is your own affair," he said, and Gwen, reading from a paper she had taken from her bag, said: "Philip John Argent, M.D., F.R.C.P., Physician, 157 Chandos Street, Cavendish Square."

"How did you find that out?" Danvers demanded.

"He was one of the ones in the telephone book, but I didn't know he was a 'Sir.'" Merrow admired the unperturbed way in which Gwen dealt with the angry Danvers.

"He has recently received his honour, and a most well deserved one too," the doctor said pompously. "He is the most eminent of our younger neurologists. But I doubt very much if you will find Sir Philip in town for some weeks yet. And I hope most sincerely that in those weeks you will consider my advice and drop this unpleasant search. That is all I can do for you. Good-day to you."

Danvers gave them both a cold bow, opened his consulting room door, and they were dismissed.

2

Gwen giggled as she climbed into Merrow's car.

"I rather shook up the old boy, I'm afraid," she said.

"You did," he agreed.

"I had to. I've done it before. It's the only way to deal with him. But it came off. And, Hugh, didn't it occur to you that he knew all about Jane's trouble?"

"No—I don't know that it did. Why?" He started the car and they ran slowly through the square towards the Fulham Road.

"Because for one thing he never denied it. He bluffed and blustered and the poor old dear was obviously terribly upset, but he couldn't bring himself to say anything more definite than that he refused to admit it, or something like that. I rather liked him for it. But I can see a lot of things more clearly now—his special interest in Janet. He really was fond of her. But, of course, she told him; you'd be a fool if you didn't tell your doctor a thing like that, and I believe now she was always sort of under his observation. That's why he was for ever dropping in."

"Yes," Merrow said. "I see what you mean. And that may account for his sudden surrender. I mean the way he suddenly named this Sir Philip Argent. That made me think he knew who we were after all the time. And when he found he couldn't frighten you off he gave in. But if he knows Argent I wouldn't put it above him to telephone him and warn him. You know what doctors are; all that mustn't tell business. But he's damned well got to tell."

Gwen said, "He has. And look here, Hugh, let's go along to Chandos Street now—at once. We might get in before old Danvers does telephone, if you're right."

Merrow nosed the car through the early evening traffic northward to the Park. He agreed with Gwen's plan and they discussed means of getting at Argent if he refused at first to talk. Merrow had an acquaintance, a Harley Street brain specialist, who he thought might help. Gwen said that if the worst came to the worst she would threaten to go to Scotland Yard again with her new facts. "And you know doctors loathe getting mixed up with that sort of publicity," she added.

But at Chandos Street they saw at once that they had run up against one of the snags old Danvers had foretold. The house

was shut up, blinds were down and the whole place wore an air of desertion.

"Still, there must be a caretaker or something. Doctors can't leave their houses entirely empty when they go on holiday. Leave this to me. I'm going to try," Merrow said.

He left the car and went up the broad steps to the front door with a jaunty air. A ring at the bell brought the answer he had half expected. A woman came from the basement door and peered up to see who the caller might be. Merrow greeted her with an easy cheeriness that surprised and amused Gwen.

"Oh, good-evening," he said, leaning over the railings. "Sir Philip's away, I see. I was afraid he would be. It's just my luck for I've only got a few days in London and I did want to see him before I left. When will he be back. I'm not a patient, by the way; this is quite an unprofessional call."

His smile implied that he was a friend and his friendly manner dispelled the woman's first embarrassment at being discovered peering. She had come half-way up the area steps to talk.

"He won't be back for good, sir, till the seventeenth of September," she said, "but he'll be up next Monday: he comes up Mondays to see some special patients."

"He won't want to see me then," Merrow laughed. "And I shan't be here on Monday anyway. I'm Mr. Merrow," he spoke as though the name would convey much to the woman, and she tried to pretend that it did. "Now I wonder if I could get hold of him on the 'phone. If he's not too far away I'd drive down. Are you allowed to give me his holiday address?"

"Well, no, sir. But of course you could write."

"No good. He wouldn't get it till the day after to-morrow. Oh, well, I will write but I shan't see him. It's a great disappointment. I suppose you couldn't—er—strain a point." His hand went to his pocket and he jingled some silver. "Don't want to get you into trouble, you know, but lots of people must know where I could find him besides you."

The woman's eyes went to a couple of half-crowns in Merrow's hand.

"Seeing you're a friend I don't see there's any harm in it," she said, and the half-crowns passed. "His letters is sent to Heathergate, Oldford."

"Golfing," Merrow laughed. "I thought so. Thank you very much, you've saved me a deal of disappointment. And Sir Philip too, I hope. Thank you, thank you. Good-evening."

He left her with a friendly nod and another cheery smile and rejoined Gwen.

"I worked it," he said. "He's at Oldford. That's not more

than fifteen miles from the Black Boy. Curious how all this business centres there."

"It is—very curious," she said thoughtfully.

3

Hugh Merrow drove back to Wilford that night. There was nothing more he could do in London, and whatever news old Webb might have of Charlton he would send it to the Black Boy, and after all the Black Boy was his job.

Gwen decided to come down the next day, by way of Oldford. But if she were unable to get an interview with Argent she would stay on at Oldford till she did. Gwen Darcy was a very determined young woman.

Merrow rang Stephen Paternoster from his club to say he might not be back before midnight, had an early meal there, and looked up Argent in the reference books while he ate it.

The books had nothing of particular interest to tell, though Merrow was interested to see that the doctor had studied in Paris and held French degrees as well as his English ones. He was a younger man than he had expected—only forty-one, married with two children. He had published several books on alcoholism and obscure nervous diseases, and "Who's Who" recorded his recreations as painting and golf.

A mental reaction set in when he started on the road. His earlier excitement and optimism faded and a mood of depression had seized him in the latter part of the drive. Things always seemed to lead to a dead end.

Even if Argent told Gwen all she wanted to know, where did it get them? Even if old Webb sent him the fullest details of Charlton's business career, where did it get them? The job was too big; it was a policeman's work, and though he and Gwen might make a score of discoveries about Janet Warren's past, so far as he could see they would never trace her blackmailer nor find proofs that would persuade the police to take action.

The old inn was sleeping serenely in the brilliant moonlight when at length he turned into the yard. He hadn't met a soul since he had left Wilborough, and the whole countryside seemed wrapped in the most profound and lovely peace. He felt a resentment against Janet Warren. Why in hell had she chosen to come to this pleasant old inn to foul it with a trail of crime and mystery and sordid tragedy?

He put the car away and went to the front door. A light in the office told him that Stephen was still about and he was glad of it. It would be a relief to have a drink and a chat with the

old fellow before he went to bed ; it would get his mind off Jane Warren.

"Hallo, Stephen," he said. "I'm back, you see. Hope you didn't sit up for me."

"No, sir, no. I've just been clearing up. I hope you enjoyed your little trip to London." Paternoster gave him a welcoming smile.

"Yes. I had a busy time though, and I'm glad to be home again. Join me in a nightcap, Stephen? Any news?"

Marrow himself poured out the drinks while the old fellow said in his unhurried way, "No, sir; nothing special. That lot of coal you ordered came this afternoon. Mr. Baldock looked in for a glass of sherry about seven and was sorry not to see you. There's a new visitor in Number Two, gentleman named Pollock staying till the end of the week, and Mr. Hawes the constable called this evening to say it's all right about Jim Bailey, he was seen over at Berriford market to-day. He thought you'd like to know."

Marrow was glad to know. At least Bailey was not going to cause any trouble.

They sat quietly chatting of little simple things until the grandfather in the hall struck midnight.

Marrow went up to bed and slept soundly.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I

GWEN DARCY'S night was not so restful. She had Argent very much on her mind. Again and again she woke from a restless doze with her brain running on some phrase with which to approach him, and she lay awake carrying on imaginary conversations.

So much depended on how she handled him, on whether he would be sympathetic or pompous like old Danvers. Restless, impatient and uncertain, she was on the road soon after nine.

Gwen drove fast. She made a dozen plans on the journey about how she would find Argent, how she would force him to see her if he refused at first, how to persuade him to tell her about Janet despite the bogey of professional etiquette, and she made use of none of them.

When, as she came to the sprawling outskirts of the little town just before noon, she overtook a bicycling postman and he told her at once where Heathergate was. She followed his direction, turned into a rutted cart track across open breezy

heathland and stopped again to enquire of a fisherman at which of the two or three biggish bungalows some distance ahead Sir Philip Argent lived.

The man looked hot and sweaty. He was hatless, in blue jersey and old and shapeless grey trousers, and he carried a string of fresh caught fish in his hand.

He said, "It's the furthest one, that queer looking shack with the green tiled roof, and if you're going there I'd be grateful for a lift. My car's broken down in the town. I'm Argent, by the way."

Gwen's surprised "You're Sir Philip Argent?" brought a smile to his sun-tanned face.

"I suppose I don't look exactly professional," he laughed. "But I am. I've been trawling." He climbed in beside her. "Were you coming to see me or my wife? If it's my wife, she's away for the day."

"I was coming to see you," she said.

"Then you'd be Miss Darcy," he answered quietly.

Gwen all but gasped.

"How on earth did you know?" she exclaimed.

Argent chuckled.

"I had a long and rather confused telephone call from a Doctor Danvers last night. He warned me about you."

"Then—but, Sir Philip—did he tell you why I wanted to see you? I mean, he can't have told you everything. I'm terribly sorry to bother you, but——"

Argent had become suddenly grave.

"You're not going to bother me, Miss Darcy," he said. "From what Danvers says I am more than anxious to talk to you. You see, I had a very particular interest in Miss—Miss Warren. I hope you will talk to me quite freely about her."

All unconsciously Gwen murmured from her heart, "Thank God."

2

Heathergate was a big modern bungalow: all roof and windows. But its position was superb.

It stood in open heathland on the summit of a gentle rise from the main road, and beyond, the land fell away sharply to saltings and mud flats that fringed a wide tidal river.

Argent left her on the veranda of a spacious living room. He brought a decanter of sherry and a box of cigarettes and said, "I shall have to leave you to amuse yourself while I go and remove fish scales from myself. Do make yourself at home. As a matter of fact you've come on a very fortunate day, my wife

and family have gone on a picnic, so we shall be undisturbed." Gwen sat for a time enjoying her sherry and revelling in the view. Towards the town the river was alive with the white sails of pleasure craft. Beyond, the summer sea glistened in the blazing sun. There were terns and gulls screaming and wheeling by the edge of the tide at the bottom of the drop, and on the far side of the river yellow corn fields shimmered in the noon time haze.

Presently Gwen turned her eyes to the room itself. There was nothing about it to suggest a stern professional medical consultant. The few pictures were gay little landscapes of the neighbouring country. They had merit, and she went inside to inspect them more closely. Then over the chimney-piece another picture drew her attention. It was unusual, full of colour and of bold design. It showed a young and bearded man seated on a café terrace, a long yellow drink in the glass on his table. The background screamed sunlight and heat; the gay striped awnings of the street looked hot, the man looked hot and tired. It was a remarkably clever bit of work.

And there was something familiar about it too. Almost she felt that she had seen it before. Then suddenly it came to her. The man—of course he was Argent, looking very young and boyish. He was clean shaven now, but in that photograph he had worn a beard. And then—she knew why it seemed familiar. It was Janet's work—bolder, less mature than that with which she was familiar, but without doubt from Janet's brush.

Argent came into the room while she was still looking at the picture.

"I'm glad you've discovered that," he said in a matter-of-fact way. "I was going to show it to you. Pretty good, don't you think? Helen did it of me, what? fourteen years ago, I suppose."

"Helen?" she queried, her mind still on the picture.

"Helen West," he said. "Didn't you know that was Miss Warren's real name?"

"Why, of course: yes, yes," she said, "and I knew it was her work."

"One couldn't mistake it. The others"—he embraced the rest of the pictures with a sweep of the hand, "are very small beer. They're my efforts. You won't want to look at them. Now, come along, Miss Darcy, and let me hear about Helen. If you want me to tell you things you'll have to do some telling first. And I want a glass of sherry. Ever been trawling? I'm no fisherman but I find trawling the most restful occupation in the world. You just sit and think and watch pleasant scenes, and you're always full of hope. That's the secret." He spoke with

mock gravity. "Hope. The finest nerve tonic in the world. When you're trawling you always hope that the next haul is going to be a magnificent one, and when you haul, if it isn't, you shoot your net once more and go on hoping. We had some quite good hauls this morning, and I hope you're going to stay and eat some of the catch with me. Lovely soles and quite fresh. I can guarantee that."

He had refilled her glass and poured himself out a drink while he was talking, and his matter-of-fact, friendly manner dispelled the last trace of self-consciousness in Gwen.

"Nothing I should like more," she said.

"Good," Argent replied. "Now then, tell me all about it from the beginning. And don't have any inhibitions because I probably know more about—Janet Warren's—life than anybody in the world."

3

Argent settled himself in a long chair and lit a cigarette with the air of a man who was looking forward to a good long gossip.

Gwen began. "Sir Philip, I'm trying to find out who drove Janet to kill herself."

Argent said with apparent unconcern, "You think she did, do you? It did seem rather like that. What are your theories?"

But he was not unconcerned. His whole manner and almost every word he spoke was studied; the result of long experience. Philip Argent had come to fame very largely because of his ability to make people talk to him naturally. He dramatised nothing. He had the faculty of making the gravest and most distressing things appear ordinary. That was why his patients seldom kept any confession from him. They never knew that he was a finished actor.

"Well, you see——" Gwen went on, and Argent with an odd question here, an apt comment there, sometimes with no more than a shake of the head, extracted from Gwen details of Janet Warren's life of which she was hardly conscious that she was aware.

And more than that, he had made her feel that she was talking of some stranger's case. And because of that he got facts untinged by personal prejudice or affection.

She finished at last and his spell for the moment weakened. She did become personal. She looked up and thought she read scepticism in his keen grey eyes.

"Well, that's all I can tell you," she said. "I suppose you think I'm a fool to feel this way about it, but I do."

"On the contrary," he answered instantly, "I do not see

how you could view the matter in any other way, and I approve most wholeheartedly of your determination. But I want to hear more. Do you know it's over ten years since I last spoke to Helen."

"Really?" He had made her forget herself again.

"We had a compact. We were never to meet again except for one reason. I'll tell you that reason in a minute or two. Now you lived with her for over three years, you say. You knew her intimately. Tell me, what did she drink?"

"You mean—drink?"

"Yes. Ever see her touch spirits?"

"Never. She loathed them." He nodded. "A little wine, sometimes beer, but when she was alone nothing."

"No secret nipping. No signs of hangovers?"

"Never."

"In normal spirits, always. Not unexpectedly cheerful or moody or irritable?"

"Perfectly normal until this beastly business began. She was always quiet and reserved, of course."

"Yes. Yes. And then on this last night she'd gone for the whisky hard, eh? Did your friend, Mr. Merrow, say what effect it had?"

"He said she seemed to crave it but it had no obvious effect. I mean it didn't make her drunk or anything like that?"

"Ah. Not obvious; it wouldn't be. But she must have been up against something bad. She wasn't a suicidal type: last thing in the world I'd have expected of her. She was a fighter: I have good reason to know that. You think she chucked her hand in because she was being blackmailed about her past. I'm not so sure that I agree. Helen—I must call her Helen—would have been far more likely to tell the whole truth to her fiancé and take the chance. You know, Miss Darcy, she was no inexperienced woman. I'm going to speak quite frankly to you. I entirely agree with you that it's no good being mealy-mouthed. She's dead. Nothing can hurt her now. And she had no relations to be hurt by anything you may drag to light. I'm going to tell you her story, and I think you'll understand that she wasn't the sort of woman to think she was going to buy immunity from trouble by paying hush money. She knew life, that sort of life too well."

Argent reached for another cigarette and went on in the same perfectly matter-of-fact way.

"I first met her in Paris, a year or so after I'd qualified, quite fifteen years ago. She was a student; she can't have been much more than twenty. I had gone to Paris to study too. From the first alcoholism and narcotics had interested me. I went to

take a further course, but I didn't spend all my time in the hospitals. I dabbled a bit in painting myself and I got in with one of the wilder painting sets. They interested me, and, you're going to find me brutally frank, I found among them cases to study, dopes and drunks, and mixing with them as I did I learned a lot of things I should never have learned in clinics or consulting rooms. I saw them at it, I got to know causes and symptoms; I won't weary you with technical details but I assure you that what I saw was painful—but immensely helpful. I'll only put it this way: doctors as a rule only see patients when the harm is done. I saw and studied it being done. A form of vivisection, if you like."

Gwen was listening intently.

"I see," she said. "I can understand."

"I wouldn't have told you if I hadn't been sure of that," he said. "Now, Helen, she was clever. I don't claim to have foreseen how clever she was going to be, but I liked her work and I liked her. But she was drinking too much. It was, I think, more to keep in with the crowd than for any true craving, shall I say, and I hoped it would pass. I tried to pull her up once or twice, but it wasn't much good. Then I came back to England. When I returned to Paris for a holiday a year later she had gone straight down and gone fast. She was a real dipsomaniac. It was shocking. She hardly ever painted and her work was rotten when she did. She had spent all her money, she was living anywhere and anyhow with the very dregs of the art crowd. She had been in prison and—well, I'll spare you the horrible details—but about the third night I was there she was run in again. So I bought her."

"You what?" Gwen's question came in sharp amazement.

"I bought her—as a case to try experiments on. She was just what I wanted, young, her condition was still acute, not chronic. I thought I could cure her. I appeared at the court, paid her fine and made myself responsible for her. The fact that I held French degrees helped. She was too exhausted and too callous to care what happened to her though, mark you, and this is important, even then there were no suicidal symptoms. I put her with a doctor friend, gave her some immediate treatment and pulled her round a bit, then I told her what I was going to do with her. I offered her five pounds a week and board and lodging for a year to come to England and let me treat her. Perhaps I didn't put it quite as brutally as that, but that was the sense of the offer." He smiled.

"And she agreed?" Gwen queried, still in a bewildered way.

"She agreed. She was in no condition to do anything else. She was under drugs; she had been sober for a week and she

was weak, depressed and ill. But again there were no suicidal tendencies. Of course she had no intention of keeping to the bargain; she told me so later. But she was penniless and five pounds a week to her meant lots of brandy. I took her home at once, and I placed her in a cottage I had just bought at Chaldean, in the care of a Nurse Marshall.

"She was a hard but most competent woman. I knew her work and admired it. And then I tried some of my experimental treatments on her. It was a stiff fight, Miss Darcy."

"Poor Janet," Gwen murmured. "It sounds, oh—damnable!"

"Precisely. It was. We had a devil of a time with her at first, yet, almost from the first day at Chaldean she had begun to fight for herself. And that is absolutely essential. You must restore the patient's will power. After a bit she wanted to be cured. She had lapses, many of them, but the will power grew. She had an amazing determination and as she grew better that determination strengthened. Well—it took nearly two years before I let her go, and the last six months of that time she was cured and working again. I had her then in a small nursing home in which I was interested, oddly enough at Shinglemouth, the place you've been speaking of. But that was before that ugly hotel was built. She was there as a rest cure patient. And then—I had to test my cure. I had to let my experiment go free into the world. And for psychological reasons I got her to agree to kill Helen West. To take a new name and a new identity. I wanted as far as possible to give her nothing of the old life to remember. Not even her name. I knew her life story; she had no near relatives and was in touch with none of her old acquaintances. She went with letters of introduction from me to New York and worked there for a year or two. I saw her off and it was then that we made our pact." He spoke very sadly. "She promised me that if ever she felt herself slipping—going back to the drink again, she would come to me at once. And I believe she would have kept her promise. Otherwise we were not to meet. It was my idea and I am sure it was best. She wrote to me from time to time, though I discouraged that. But I followed her career with the utmost interest: you see, Miss Darcy, I owed a great deal to Helen West for letting me experiment with her. She was, if I may so put it, my first success. And because of that, there are very many people to-day who were once in her deplorable state, who owe much to her too."

Argent was silent for a second or two, then, "I wanted you to know these things before we go on talking," he added, "so that you may understand that it is not easy for me to answer your question whether I could suggest anybody who knew of

her past and might be likely to have been blackmailing her about it."

4

Gwen Darcy nodded thoughtfully. Already she had begun to realise this difficulty.

"There were so many who might have—been capable of it, you mean?" she queried after a moment.

"Very many," Argent said quietly. "She had some utterly disreputable companions—of the underworld. Yet I do not feel so seriously concerned about them. I'll tell you why. It was a long time ago: many of them must have doped or drunk themselves to death long since. They were mostly foreigners, French, Poles, Russians, who would be most unlikely ever to have been able to trace Helen or to have wanted to at the time. Of course someone may have recognised her, and pierced her identity. It's difficult, as I say, but not insoluble."

Gwen cheered up: the man seemed to exude confidence.

"We thought, Mr. Merrow and I, that it might have been some one at Chaldean, but now I'm wondering if it might not have been someone at this nursing home at Shinglemouth. It's a queer coincidence how everything throws back to this neighbourhood," Gwen said.

Argent retorted bluntly, "It's significant. But I don't believe in coincidences. I was thinking of Shinglemouth too."

"Could we trace who was there with her? I mean if it wasn't one of them it might be someone connected with them. This Mr. Charlton, for instance."

"I may be able to help you there. I keep notes and a diary, but they're in London. Or I might be able to get in touch with Nurse Marshall."

"Yes, she might help," Gwen said.

"If I can find her. She ran the Shinglemouth home, and when it failed I lost sight of her."

"Oh, she ran it?"

"Yes. She was an excellent nurse for certain cases. But that didn't mean that she was a good business woman. I told her so, but she wouldn't take my advice. I spend much of my life giving people advice that they won't follow." He smiled rather bleakly. "But I'm going to give you some now. Be patient. You are trying to be a detective. I have met many professional detectives in my time, and they would all give you that same advice. Will you take it?"

"I'll try."

"Good. Now then. The one definite person who stands out

in this complex affair is Charlton. Have you any description of him?"

"No. Mr. Merrow may have, or may be getting one. And Milly Claxton could give it to us."

"Patiently we must get that description. And now we're going to have lunch."

And with that Philip Argent seemed to dismiss the whole matter from his mind. More, he almost made Gwen dismiss it from hers. He got her talking about the Black Boy and Hugh Merrow and his plans, and how she was going to help him with the decorating. And he said, "Tell him I'm coming over to see this marvellous inn soon."

They did talk a little more about Janet after lunch, but Argent did not encourage the subject, though he laughed when he said, "Poor Doctor Danvers, he would be terribly shocked, I'm afraid, if he knew I hadn't taken his advice."

"He would be," Gwen retorted. "He's rather a dear, but he can be a pompous old idiot. Still he was devoted to Janet, and it must have come as a terrible shock to him when we told him about her."

"Danvers knew her medical history," Argent said dryly. "I told him when she went to Chelsea. He was only being professional. I kept closer tabs on her, as the Americans say, than she suspected. That's why I want to help you."

He saw her into her car and gave her a final admonition not to be in too much of a hurry.

"I shall be in London on Monday and I may have some suggestions to make when I've looked up my diary," he said, and she drove away in a curiously optimistic mood, though, as she had to admit to herself, but for having heard the terrible story of Janet's early life she had learned nothing to help in her quest.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I

MERROW rather expected to hear from old John Webb by the morning's post. But no letter came and he was not sorry. The overnight reaction was still upon him and he was revelling in the humdrum peace of the Black Boy.

He had plenty of odd jobs to do about the inn, and he spent some time with the new visitor halfway through the morning. Mr. Ferdinand Pollock of Leicester, as the hotel register proclaimed him, was an enthusiastic amateur photographer with

an ardent uninstructed passion for old buildings and old inns, and a refreshing thirst for knowledge about the Black Boy's history.

Mr. Pollock took many pictures of the Black Boy, taking immense pains over some of the interior views, then at Stephen's suggestion went off to take more views of Wilford Priory. Stephen even telephoned to get Mr. Baldock's permission, since Pollock seemed diffident of trespassing on private property, as he put it.

But Merrow's peaceful morning ended about noon. There was a telephone call for him and he heard old John Webb's voice at the other end of the wire. Webb spoke guardedly.

"Concerning that matter you were enquiring about, Mr. Hugh," he said. "I thought I'd rather speak than write about it. Go very, very carefully with Mr. C."

"You've traced him then?" Merrow queried with aroused interest.

"I think so. I cannot be certain. But if he's your man, I'd leave him alone. He is no longer a practising solicitor. There was some trouble with his firm a few years ago. Logan and C. they were of Whitmore Chambers. As I understand there were no proceedings, but Logan decamped and was drowned somewhere on Riviera. We have a client in Whitmore Chambers who remembers them well; a small firm with little business, and your Mr. C. had no very creditable reputation. A racing man, and that's probably where his money went."

"Where does he live?" Merrow asked.

"I was just going to tell you," Webb said reprovably. "Don't hurry me. Our client lives at Padstow Park, that new suburb out beyond Harrow, and he tells me that C. and his wife have recently taken a furnished house there. He tells me he sees C. sometimes at the local hotel, but he believes he is away holiday-making at the moment down in your part of the world."

"Down here? Where?"

"On a yacht which I understand he keeps at a place called Wodenbridge."

"Wodenbridge? I know it, it's not twenty miles from here."

"I was saying it was in your part of the world," old Webb reproved him again. "Now, Mr. Hugh, there are some things better not said in detail, but I have gained the impression that Mr. C. has a questionable character in business matters. What his calling is now I cannot say, but it would appear that from time to time he is in funds and then again from time to time he is not. And that's no kind of a man to have dealings with. That is all you will want to know, I think. As for the firm you spoke of—the hotel agency—it is perfectly respectable." Webb became

more human as he rang off. "Take my advice, Hughie," he said, "leave the person in question very much alone. He's a bad egg, a very bad egg."

And that from John Webb was a major damnation.

2

That cautious old Webb knew a deal more than he had told, Merrow had no doubt. But the only way to get fuller details would be by seeing him face to face, and for a few moments Merrow debated going straight off to London to question him.

Then he realised that that could wait. It was more important to identify this man, Frederick E. Charlton, and possibilities of identification were nearer to hand: at Wodenbridge, half an hour's drive away.

Hugh Merrow knew something of the sailing fraternity. Archie Warner, his wine merchant friend, owned a little four-ton sloop, the *Hebe*, at Burnham, and Merrow often spent an odd day or two with him nosing about the Essex estuaries. Indeed only a couple of summers before they had ventured as far as Wodenbridge itself. They had been weather-bound there for two days, and Merrow recalled how he had intended to job a car and take Archie to Wilford to see his pet pub, the Black Boy. But a sudden shift of wind made them abandon their trip and they had to put to sea again instead. And now, already he had decided, he was going to drive from the Black Boy to Wodenbridge.

He made a vague explanation to Stephen about having to take his car into Wilborough to have the brakes adjusted, and said he would lunch at the Crown there while the job was being done.

Paternoster answered placidly, "That'll be all right, sir. I'll see to everything," and Merrow was away ten minutes later.

Wodenbridge is an ancient port, a serene and sleepy place of narrow streets and red roofs and hidden gardens. It clustered about a hillside overlooking the tidal river Woden. But grass grows on its once busy wharves and quays now, and only a few tan-sailed barges come beating up the tortuous channel on the flood tide to remind Wodenbridge of its long ago prosperous days.

Merrow loved those wharves and quays. For they were peopled with ghosts, ghosts of old shipmen who had set eyes on Raleigh and Drake, ghosts of sailors who had seen the great fight in Sole Bay and tough mariners who had followed their lawful occasions on the high seas that Blake and Howe and Nelson kept open for them.

There was an ancient tavern close by the quays—the Hoy—where bargemen and yachtsmen and everybody who frequents Wodenbridge's waterfront rub shoulders in a big low-ceilinged parlour overlooking the river. Merrow and Archie Warner had drunk much beer and enjoyed much good conversation there during their enforced stay off the little town. Merrow made his way there first of all.

He hoped he would be remembered, and he was. Grey-haired George Beal, the landlord, seldom forgot a sailing customer.

"I've seen you before, sir," he said as he took Merrow's money. "Some good time ago it 'ud be, wouldn't it? You was with another gentleman from Burnham way, wasn't it?"

"I was," Merrow said. "A couple of years ago when we had that summer gale, if you remember——"

"I recall it. Rough old night that was. That was the time Mr. Morgan's *Fairy* dragged her moorings, wasn't it, Sam?"

A blue-jerseyed fisherman at the bar nodded, and joined in with another memory of that hard August blow, and a man in a yachting cap added his recollections. Merrow remembered how easy it was to start a general conversation in the parlour of the Hoy. Presently Merrow said, "I was rather hoping to find my friend here to-day. He hasn't been in, Mr. Beal, has he? Mr. Warner of the *Hebe*?"

"No, sir. I haven't seen him, not for some time. He was in here for a night end of May time, round about Whitsun, if I remember rightly. Maybe he'll be coming up on this tide. No one haven't seen a boat called *Hebe*, have they?" Beal added, addressing the room.

Nobody had, though she was remembered, and Merrow having established his background strolled out on to the quay with a promise to return later.

There were half a dozen or so yachts moored out in the stream and he eyed them curiously. It shouldn't be difficult with a little tactful questioning to discover if one of them were Charlton's boat. The fisherman whom Beal had called Sam gave him an opportunity.

He came along from the inn carrying a crate of bottled beer on his shoulder, and Merrow asked him some questions about the tides and began another conversation which led, naturally enough to the yachts at anchor. Sam dumped his crate on the ground, ready and willing to talk. He knew most of the yachts. The big yawl that had come in overnight was a stranger from the Solent; the little white cutter belonged to Harwich, another, a bluff-bowed craft, was a Dutchman that belonged to an Orford gentleman, three others were Wodenbridge craft. Merrow

fixed on one of them at hazard to make further enquiries, but she was owned by the local doctor. He admired another. Sam agreed with him.

"Now she is a nice little boat," he said. "An old 'un too. Built here in Wodenbridge over fifty years ago, but she's seaworthy and as sound now as ever she were."

"Who owns her?" Merrow asked casually.

Sam answered proudly, "She belong to me, sir."

"Oh, does she?" Merrow felt he must praise her a bit more before he asked further questions. "Yes. I like the look of her. What's her name?"

"Well, we call her the *Peggy*, sir," Sam grinned, "though rightly her name's *Pegasus*—Mr. Charlton, he always calls her *Pegasus*——"

"Mr. Charlton!" Merrow said sharply. "Who's he?"

"London gentleman who's hired her for the season. I let her out every season and sometimes for fowling in the winter."

"I see," Merrow forced a laugh. "The gentleman thinks *Pegasus* sounds a bit smarter, I suppose?"

"That's about it, sir."

"Is he a sailing man?"

"Why, yes, sir. He can manage her all right, but he don't sail a lot. Most he just lives aboard her, him and his lady. Says he'd rather live aboard her than at an hotel, and I don't blame him. Has his friends down to see him and sails them down to the mouth perhaps. But he don't often go outside." Sam looked about him. "I was expecting him along about now. He left an order at the Hoy for a dozen bottles when he come ashore this morning. I reckon I'll just put 'em in the dinghy and get off to my dinner."

He carried the crate down the weed-hung steps and placed it carefully in the stern of a trim little varnished dinghy tied up there, then with a friendly "Hope the gentleman you're expecting will be up on this tide, sir," and a jab at his cap as he added, "Wish you good-morning, sir," Sam rolled off towards the town.

Merrow found a seat in full sight of the steps, lit a cigarette, and prepared to wait till nightfall if needs be.

3

But his vigil was not to be a long one. Barely ten minutes had passed before he saw a man and a woman coming along the Quay. The man looked the too complete yachtsman in white covered yachting cap, smart reefer coat and very clean white shoes. He was a tall, good-looking man, suggestive of the stage,

with dark hair very slightly tinged with grey. But his eyes were sleepy and restless. Even when he was speaking to one of the boatmen lounging near the steps those half-closed eyes were ranging the Quay and his head swung round as though he were seeking someone.

Merrow at the moment was apparently lighting a pipe, his face bent down, but he was registering the man very carefully. He was sure he was Charlton when he heard him ask if Sam had brought the beer along, adding, "Yes. I see he's shoved it in the dinghy."

He scrambled into the little boat and helped his companion in. Merrow's eyes fixed on her. She was not young, tall and plump with dark chestnut hair that didn't look too genuine in colour. She looked flashy rather than smart, though her light summer dress was good. She nearly slipped on the slimy steps and exclaimed frankly, "Oh, damn the things."

Charlton said rudely, "Why aren't you more careful? You oughtn't to wear those silly shoes in a boat."

Merrow's mind was intensely active: it was all on the woman now. He had seen her somewhere, but for the life of him he couldn't place her. Had she been to the Black Boy? Or was it in London? Dorani's flickered at the back of his mind: when he and Gwen had been dining there. He must have seen her there. Charlton shoved off and backed the dinghy from the steps, and for a few seconds Merrow had a profile view of the woman against the light.

Then it came to him in a flash of startling revelation—the big nose, that tight, hard mouth—he knew.

He had seen her photograph. The woman in the boat with Charlton was Nurse Marshall.

Merrow watched them rowing out, watched them climb aboard while swiftly the many implications of his discovery ran wildly through his brain, and the whole plot became crystal clear. It was the nurse who had instigated the blackmail—she would know everything about Janet Warren's tragedy. And this rogue Charlton was acting for her.

It was a grim and beastly reflection but it was true; it must be. Now what was to be done. According to Sam these two crooks were settled in Wodenbridge for a week or two more at anyrate. And he should know a good deal about them. Webb could get their London address. The fish were hooked, but could they land them.

He rose suddenly, looked in at the Hoy to leave a fictitious message for Archie Warner, dashed for his car and headed back to the Black Boy.

Gwen had to be told his news: at once.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

FROM the cockpit of the cutter yacht *Pegasus* Mr. Frederick Charlton was watching Wodenbridge Town Quay through powerful binoculars. From the cabin the woman called to him peevishly :

"What are you doing, Fred? Irene won't be here for an hour yet. For God's sake come and help me tidy up: the place is like a pigsty."

Charlton answered curtly, "I'm not looking for Irene. I'm looking at something I don't like."

"Oh? What?" The woman's voice was apprehensive and she came to the foot of the companion ladder.

"Keep down," he ordered her in the same sharp tone. "Don't interrupt."

She stood waiting until at length he dropped his glasses and joined her. He was frowning.

"What is it?" she asked again, more anxiously.

"That fellow on the seat at the head of the Quay when we came off. He was Merrow of the Black Boy. I spotted him. He tried to cover his face when we came along. He's just cleared off in a hurry. Now what the hell's he up to?"

"Merrow?" Hilda Marshall echoed. "Are you sure?"

"Quite. I don't like it."

The woman tried to reassure him, but she was not very convincing.

"I don't see you've got anything to get worried about," she said. "He lives close here. Why shouldn't he be here?"

"Why shouldn't he?" Charlton retorted savagely. "He didn't live very close to Chaldean, didn't he? Why shouldn't the Darcy woman go to Shinglemouth? And what the hell are they up to? that's what I want to know. I'm going to let Logan know about this. I'm going ashore."

"Don't be in such a damn hurry. You'd better make sure he has gone first."

"Yes. And let Irene walk right into him if he hasn't," Charlton snapped.

"I forgot that," the woman said.

"Well, I didn't. You and Logan don't take the chances I do or perhaps you wouldn't forget things."

"Well, anyhow, mix me a drink before you do go. I expect it'll be all right."

"It'll be a hell of a joke for some of us if it isn't," Charlton said, starting to mix a cocktail. "I shall go to the station and warn Irene. In fact I've a damned good mind to tell her not to

come aboard here at all. She can hire a car and go down to Ewegate and we'll sail down and pick her up there. I smell trouble, Hilda."

The woman no longer made an effort at reassurance. She gulped her drink moodily.

"What I don't understand is who's stirring up the stink," she said at last. "You don't seem to know the answer, nor does Logan."

"Or if he does, he's not telling," Charlton put in bitterly. "Trust Logan to look after himself. I'll bet he knows more than he's told. But he can't fool me. He's had the wind up bad ever since Warren did herself in. I'd have said it was Sudbourne behind it, only in his position he'd have gone to the Yard. I don't know——"

"Perhaps Irene will know," the woman said.

Charlton took up his glasses and once more scanned the Quay.

"Seems all clear," he commented after a few moments.

"I'm going." He pulled the dinghy alongside and rowed back to the shore.

Mr. Charlton showed no signs of perturbation when he landed, though he scrutinised the Quay most carefully as he went up the steps before he slowly walked towards the Hoy.

It was the dinner hour and there were only a couple of customers there, both watermen whom he knew. Charlton asked for a pink gin. He had, he said, intended to have ordered a bottle of whisky with his beer and he'd come ashore for it. Then in a genial way he invited Beal to join him in a drink, and drew him on to gossip. But though he tried half a dozen leads he got no result. George Beal in no way associated Mr. Charlton with the gentleman who had been asking about the *Hebe*. People were always asking George Beal questions about people and boats.

Fortified by several pink gins Charlton became less nervous. It was a hot day and he weakened in his intention to walk up to the station to meet Irene Marks. He'd let her come down as they had arranged. He'd have a final scout round to make quite sure that Merrow had gone and wait for her on the Quay.

He ordered another pink gin.

Presently he wandered out and scoured the Quay thoroughly, resting at length on the seat Merrow had occupied. Sam Parsons back from his dinner found him there.

"Got the beer all right, I hope, sir," he said.

"Yes. That's all right, Sam," Charlton replied.

"I'd have put it aboard for you only I was kept talking by a gentleman——"

"What gentleman," Charlton demanded sharply.

"Why, I don't know his name, sir, but he's been here before. He was asking about a boat called the *Hebe*. A friend of his is coming up in her. Reckon she ought to be up soon if she caught the tide." Sam's keen eyes ranged the river. "Gentleman was saying he liked the look of *Peggy*," he went on.

"Oh," Charlton said smoothly. "Liked her looks, did he? What's he want? To hire her?" He laughed. "Anyhow, I hope you told him she was let for the season."

"I did mention that, sir. Not that I think he wanted her. But I said she was let to you."

Charlton stiffened, but only for a moment. He was quite jovial as he chaffed Sam about wanting to let the boat to a new-comer and turn him out, but he got a good description of Merrow from the unsuspecting man.

He broke off conversation, still in the same jesting strain, when he caught sight of a smart but quietly dressed woman coming on to the Quay. She was carrying a little suitcase. Charlton went to meet her. He greeted her in a soft, smooth voice.

"Hallo, Irene, glad you've come," he said. "Let's get out to the boat at once."

"Anything happened?" she asked.

He tried to laugh away her question. "Only that I'm hungry and want my lunch," he answered. "Hilda's on board."

"You're lying, Fred," she said bluntly.

He answered in the same smooth way, "Am I? Anyhow we can't talk here." But as they rowed out he went on with a hard little laugh, "If you'd been here a bit earlier you'd have found an old friend on the Quay."

"Who?" she demanded.

"The inquisitive gentleman you entertained at Chaldean—"

"What—Merrow?"

"The same. He's suddenly got interested in me now."

The woman stared at him incredulously.

"Good God, Fred! Who is he?"

"The owner of the *Black Boy* at Wilford—that's all I know."

"Funny, aren't you? What's Logan say?"

"He doesn't know yet. Hilda thought you might know something about him."

"Me? Why me? I'd never heard of him till yesterday when he came to that god-forsaken cottage asking his questions. I got his name off some maps in his car while he was talking to the woman there, Mrs. Boon. I phoned Logan that and his car number when he'd gone and he told me to come here and get my instructions from you."

"All right, don't get excited. I don't know what your in-

structions are yet. I've got to phone him at three to let him know that you've come. I expect he'll want to see you somewhere. But you know what Logan is—God knows where it'll be."

They came alongside the *Pegasus* and Irene Marks scrambled on board.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I

PHILIP ARGENT'S interest in Gwen's story was very much deeper than she imagined. Argent was all too familiar with pitiful stories of blackmail.

Again and again among his patients he had come upon victims of the foulest of all crimes—men driven to drink, women to drugs in effort to escape the mental torture of their lives.

When the confessions came, as they did sometimes under Argent's quiet sympathetic questionings, the doctor always gave the same advice: Go to the police. But his advice was seldom taken.

He knew better than most people the moral courage it demanded, and most of his patients had long since lost all strength of mind. Maybe they knew that he was right, but they knew too what police proceedings would mean. The public might never know the identity of Mr. X or Miss Y, but their own friends and families and acquaintances would, and it was to keep them in ignorance that the wretched victims paid.

Now and again he had found one with guts enough to fight, and once a woman in frenzy had killed her persecutor, but mostly they had paid, endured and died. Yet there had been one exception that concerned Philip Argent particularly.

To him, some five years ago, had come Marcus Fielding, an old fellow student, a man with a prosperous practice in a south coast town. He came for advice, not only medical. Argent saw at once that he was drinking hard and when he heard his story he swore to help the man despite himself.

Fielding had clearly been deliberately trapped. A perfectly innocent series of incidents had been engineered into a most compromising situation with a woman patient. Exposure would mean ruin—removal from the Medical Register and shame.

Argent besought him to prosecute, but he wouldn't. He would have to go on paying. Argent ceased to argue and determined to find another way out. He remembered a Mr. Humbert Pringle.

Mr. Humbert Pringle was one of the heads of Pringle's

Detective Service, that famous Anglo-American agency in Holborn more feared by the underworld than Scotland Yard. Pringles boasts that it cannot afford a failure and that it never abandons a case.

Pringles' men and women work like slaves when they are on the job, and sometimes there are casualties—exhausted nerves kept going on drink or even drugs. Such cases were Mr. Humbert's concern: Pringles looks after its staff. And many years ago Mr. Humbert had begun to send his casualties at the firm's expense to Philip Argent. Argent more often than not sent them back to Pringles well men or women and Pringles was duly grateful, letting it be known that if at any time Philip Argent had need of their help he had but to say so.

Argent put Fielding's case in their hands with instructions to stop the blackmail without prosecution if possible. What Pringles did Argent never knew in detail but they did what he asked of them. In the process a City solicitor with a small police court practice and, as he understood, a much larger blackmailing practice, disappeared suddenly. His name was Logan, and a week or two later he was reported drowned at Monte Carlo.

Fielding knew nothing of this matter. He only knew an untellable relief when the terror suddenly went out of his life. And Argent made a cure of his case.

When Gwen had gone, after lunch that day, Philip Argent in a long chair on his veranda, thought again of Pringles.

There was a cheery dark haired fellow of theirs, a man with an apparently simple ingenuous manner and at times a grave enthusiastic voice who had handled the Fielding case. Salter his name was, and Pringles said he knew more about blackmailers and blackmailing than any man in Europe. Argent pondered for some time then decided. He telephoned Pringles.

They put him through to Mr. Humbert Pringle at once when they heard his name—Pringles never forgot names—and to him Argent explained very sketchily what he wanted.

"It's general advice more than anything else, Mr. Humbert," he finished. "And I shall pass on that advice to another person. But I'm not entirely disinterested. The matter does touch something in which I was once concerned. If it's at all possible I wonder if I could see Mr. Salter when I am in town on Monday."

Humbert Pringle said, "I think that can be managed, Sir Philip. Salter's out of town at the moment, but we can easily get in touch with him. I'll let you know. By the way, I'd better have your Oldford address and telephone number."

Argent rang off and went back to his chair. He was glad that he was alone that afternoon. He had many things to think

about, but chiefly his mind centred on Helen West. He had been very proud of what he had been able to do for her. Very proud of what she had done for herself. Between them they had dragged a human being from the depths and turned her into a brilliant painter. Until the depths had intervened to bring about her tragic death.

He fell to thinking of her as a case. Of her taking to spirits again. That puzzled him. Nerving herself for the end, he supposed. Poor Helen! She must have suffered like hell—or else gone back to the drink in secret. It was a complex problem.

The telephone bell rang, and Argent hoisted himself from his chair to answer it. Gwen Darcy was speaking.

"Oh, Sir Philip," she said, "I've just had some, some rather unpleasant news about the, the matter we were discussing. Mr. Merrow found it out this afternoon, he's just told me. I—I don't want to talk about it on the telephone, but could I—could we—come over and see you about it? I really do think it's urgent. We could be with you in about twenty minutes."

Argent said, "No. It would be better for me to come and see you. My family may be home at any moment now. Black Boy, Wilford, isn't it?" Expect me sometime within the next hour. I don't know whether they've fixed my car yet, so I may be delayed a bit."

2

Argent was as good as his word. He was pulling up outside the Black Boy well within the hour. Gwen was sitting in the porch waiting for him.

She had been chatting to the antiquarian-minded Mr. Ferdinand Pollock, whom she had found sitting there. Mr. Pollock painted as well as took photographs, it seemed, and he had original if not very erudite views on modern art. He even mentioned Janet's work but appeared not to know of her association with the inn. When Gwen rose to go out to greet Philip Argent, Mr. Pollock with his camera retired tactfully to the hall. But he stood for some seconds watching the two as they met. He heard Sir Philip's, "What a perfect gem of a place, Miss Darcy," spoken without any suggestion of concern. He heard Gwen reply as easily, "I knew you'd like it, Sir Philip. Come along in, you're just in time for tea."

Then Mr. Pollock drifted unostentatiously in the background. He did not want to be noticed.

Later when he had returned to the hall, as unobtrusively, and looked about him to see where Gwen and her guest were sitting,

Mr. Pollock was surprised not to see them either there or in the oak-beamed parlour. He chose a table in a dark corner and rang for his own tea.

Gwen had taken Argent up to Merrow's room, and there Sir Philip learned something which previously he had thought of only as a most unpleasant possibility, a hardly possible possibility—Nurse Marshall had turned crook.

He accepted Merrow's surmise without argument.

"Of course it will have to be proved, but her association with this man Charlton makes it appear very black," he said. "And it makes a grave difference to me. I must ask you and Miss Darcy, to let me come entirely into your councils now. For you see this woman was employed by me. I am therefore in a way responsible. And one cannot hope that Miss—er—Warren would be the only victim. There were others, much more potentially profitable ones. Mr. Merrow, before we go on talking, I want to make a call to London. Is your telephone comparatively private?"

"There is a call box in the hall. Its fairly sound-proof. I'll show it to you."

"That'll do. It's just that I don't want to waste any time."

Merrow took him to the box and returned to Gwen. Mr. Pollock from his quiet table saw them come down the stairs and his eyes fixed on them in question. Presently in his unobtrusive manner Mr. Pollock drifted across the hall. While Argent was in the telephone box Mr. Pollock at a table close by was apparently selecting a magazine to read. When the doctor emerged from the cabinet, he addressed him:

"I thought it was you, Sir Philip. You remember me, Pollock"—he stressed the name and repeated it—"Pollock. We used to play golf together at Oldford."

Sir Philip started.

"But good lord, Mr——"

"Pollock." There was an unmistakable look of warning in the man's eyes. Argent read it.

"But of course, Mr. Pollock; I remember you perfectly; What a curious coincidence meeting you here."

"Exactly what I was thinking, Sir Philip. I was coming over to Oldford to-morrow and had hoped to find you there. Would that be convenient?"

Argent said, "Perfectly. Delighted to see you."

"You are with friends, I see," Pollock went on, "I mustn't detain you, but I felt I must speak to you."

Argent dropped his voice. "I want a word with you at once. How can it be managed?" he said.

"Room Two," Pollock said. "I'll go up at once." He put

out his hand. "Good bye, Sir Philip. I am so glad to have seen you."

Argent returned to Merrow's room.

"Will you excuse me for a few minutes," he said. "I've just met an old acquaintance downstairs; one of your guests, Mr. Merrow—Mr. Pollock. I haven't seen him for years and I must just have a few words with him."

"Of course," Merrow responded.

Argent went along by the corridor and entered Room Two.

"This is pretty quick work even for Pringles, Salter," he said as he closed the door.

"An extraordinary coincidence, Sir Philip. I had Mr. Humbert through to me on the phone not half an hour ago, and actually I was about to ring you up when I saw you arrive."

"I've just been talking to Mr. Humbert myself," Argent said. "He told me I should be hearing from you to-day."

3

Salter offered Sir Philip the bedroom's one arm chair and seated himself cross legged on the bed. Francis Salter in that, a favourite position of his, was most unlike the seriously eager antiquarian, Mr. Ferdinand Pollock, whom the Black Boy knew.

Argent spoke more intimately.

"What's the position, Salter?" he asked. "Are you on a job or a holiday?"

Salter nodded. "I'm on a job all right, but old Humbert's instructions are that it can be side-tracked for a day or two if you want me. What's your trouble, sir. Not your own, I hope."

"Yes and no, Salter. It's another case of filthy blackmailing."

"What? That's funny. This is my coincidental day."

Argent laughed. He had always liked the cheery way in which Salter took his work. One of Sir Philip's greatest aversions was pomposity.

"What's the joke and why so coincidental?" he asked.

"Do you know who I am after at the moment?" Salter said.

"Our old friend Logan."

"Logan, that bloodsucking swine! But damn it, the man's dead, Salter."

"Is he? I've been trying to prove it and I can't. I've only come back from Monte a couple of weeks ago. There's no evidence, not a shred. It was a fake. They don't enquire too closely into suicides there. Matter of fact, we never did believe at the office that he was drowned."

"But is he at his old games?"

"He is. Same time technique, anyhow. And in fact too close a connection in this particular case to leave any doubts. You know Logan has a police court practice?"

"I remember."

"This case was one of his clients. Got into trouble as a young chap—clerk in a City office. Logan defended him. Well now he's not a clerk in a City office. He employs hundreds of them instead and he's in the running for an important position. Logan's trying to cash in on his knowledge with the papers of the old case. But he's backed a loser. Our man's going to fight, but he's leading him on. Can't tell you any more, but that's why I want to find Logan."

"Good luck to your man," Argent said. "But this is amazingly curious. Salter—didn't Logan have a partner?"

"Eh?" Salter became suddenly alert. "Why do you ask that?"

"You haven't answered my question, Salter."

"He did. A man named Charlton."

"I thought so, but I didn't entirely trust my memory. What do you know about him?"

"Not as much as I'd like to, Sir Philip. I can tell you where he is now if you want to know."

"Oh, I can tell you that, Salter. He's living aboard a yacht at Wodenbridge with his wife, or I suppose she's his wife. Yacht's named *Pegasus*, hired for the season from a man called Sam. I can tell you more about him, too, but I want to know what you know."

Salter swung his feet to the floor.

"Look here, doctor," he said. "What are you up to?"

"I'm interested in Charlton."

"Damn it; so am I. It's through him that I'm here. He's in touch with Logan, I swear."

"Are you implying that Logan's here?"

"No—or if he is, I haven't found him. I came here to see what was doing on the strength of a scrap of conversation I overheard. Two days ago Charlton was telephoning from the Hoy inn—a nice little pub. Nothing to be got from what he said, he's a very careful, cunning fellow is Charlton, but it was a very strong line and I caught a word or two of what the fellow at the other end was saying. Two of the words were, 'Black Boy.' Charlton said, 'Is she going back there?' I don't know what the answer was, but I looked up Black Boys in the directory. There were only three in the county and this was the nearest, so I came along to see what I could pick up."

"Do you know who he was talking to?"

"No such luck, but I think I know where. He's phoned there before. The Beach Hotel, Shinglemouth."

Argent said, "You're right, Salter: an extraordinarily coincidental day. Just a moment, I've got some friends here who'll be useful to you. Give me a moment to warn them."

CHAPTER TWENTY

I

FOR the second time that day Gwen Darcy told in detail the story of what she had done to try to discover Janet Warren's blackmailer. To her story Merrow added his, and Argent helped to make the narrative more complete with occasional explanations and useful comments.

Mostly Salter listened, speaking only to ask some pertinent question to make more clear some point that seemed too vague or uncertain. He made frequent notes in shorthand with extraordinary skill. Merrow noticed him. The man had the faculty of writing on his knee without looking at his note book, sometimes filling half a dozen pages without ever taking his eyes from whomever was speaking to him at the time. Certainly this crisp-spoken, very colloquial Mr. Francis Salter was a very different person from the eagerly refreshing Mr. Pollock.

At last he seemed to be satisfied. For perhaps a couple of minutes he studied his cryptic notes, then abruptly he turned to Argent. "I take it you want me to advise Miss Darcy and Mr. Merrow," he said.

"That is so."

"I advise them to drop any further investigation——"

"Drop it!" Gwen exclaimed. "I certainly will not, Mr. Salter."

"Now wait a minute," Salter said. "Listen to what I've got to say first. You don't know what you've taken on. This sort of game isn't for amateurs, particularly when you're dealing with men like Logan and his gang. You don't want to have an accident, do you, Miss Darcy?"

"An accident?" she repeated in a bewildered tone. "Do you mean a—a deliberate accident—that I might be attacked? Because if so, I'm not afraid."

"No, I don't think you are. That makes it all the more likely."

"But surely, Salter, you don't think there's any serious chance of such a thing?" Argent put in.

"I do indeed. Listen, doctor. You know Pringles' men

never drop a case. Well some years ago—I'm going to confide in you—Pringles were after this bloodsucker Logan. He got away and was supposed to be drowned. So far as the client was concerned the case was satisfactorily ended." Argent found it hard to restrain a smile. Salter was good: there was not the slightest suggestion that Argent was the client of whom he spoke. "But Pringles didn't forget Logan. They were never quite satisfied that he was dead. From time to time odd bits of information turned up in connection with other cases that had a bearing on Logan. That all went into the records. I looked up those records when I was put on this present case of mine and I knew a lot without having to look them up. Doctor," Salter spoke very seriously, "we've got enough information about Logan, in Holborn—if we could prove it, mark you—to get him fifteen years and possibly a rope. Now then if we know that about the swine, what's he know about himself? And do you think he or any of the gang that works for him is going to be particular if they find a couple of amateurs nosing into their affairs and finding out anything that might get 'em into trouble. Believe me they're not."

"As bad as that, is it?" Merrow said, impressed by the man's earnestness.

"Quite as bad. Logan is a big man, and a clever one. He works behind a screen of lesser crooks, and all of them, I would not mind betting, have got to work for him because he knows enough about them to make 'em. That's the blackmailer's way. He'd pay them well so long as they did what he told them. But if they didn't—there'd be 'information received' at the Yard one morning, or else they'd have an accident, according to whether he thought they knew enough about him to make it awkward. I dare say most of his gang have never set eyes on him. Now, Miss Darcy——"

"Well?" Gwen was still defiant.

"I'm going to tell you something. I've an idea that Logan is getting interested in you."

"Why?"

"What other 'she' at the Black Boy may have been worrying him. He'll know your connection with Miss Warren and clearly he thinks you're up to something. How, don't ask me. But your going to the Beach at Shinglemouth was probably noted. He's got contacts there—Charlton proves that. And he's got a contact here."

"What, in this house?" Merrow protested.

"Undoubtedly."

"Who the devil do you suggest I've got in this house who is connected with the sort of people you've been talking about?"

Merrow was indignant. Salter was utterly unperturbed.

"Well, Mr. Merrow," he said indulgently, "you can look for potentials among your customers or your staff——"

"I'll vouch for my staff——"

"Aren't you overlooking one very obvious link? Paternoster's daughter, who's actually working at Shinglemouth. I dare say she's in frequent communication with her father and sister."

Merrow bridled.

"Look here, Mr. Salter," he began. "If you suggest any of the Paternosters are spying on me or Miss Darcy——"

"Not spying in the true sense," Salter interrupted. "But you'll agree with me that there is communication between the Black Boy and the Beach Hotel?"

"Well—er—yes, of course. Naturally Milly writes to her family and they write to her, I suppose. And——" He remembered then that Milly often telephoned to Eve since the instrument had been installed at the inn. Eve spoke of it openly and said how nice it was. "But damn it all, Salter, neither of Paternoster's girls would do a thing like that."

"Not if they knew what they were doing. But a word here and a word there, and a cunning question, Mr. Merrow, everybody talks unwisely at times, even the most cautious of us. Otherwise—my job would be gone." He laughed.

"I'll speak to Eve about it," Merrow said testily.

"Please don't. That would be what I call a cautious man talking unwisely. She may not be the contact, but if you spoke to her you'd probably make her an unwitting one. I want you to drop all this investigation——"

"I won't," Gwen said. "Not unless the police will take it up."

"Miss Darcy, the police will never take it up, no matter how much evidence you might give them," Salter said. "You saw Coles at the Yard, you say: he should have told you, but the police are very hidebound in some ways. We have the advantage of them; we haven't to worry about red tape. What exactly did he say to you?"

"Well," Gwen frowned. "I—I've told you as much as I remember—All about not stirring up mud and having nothing definite to go on. I'm afraid I got rather angry with him."

"What he should have made quite clear to you was that no charge could be brought in Miss Warren's case though you gave him all the evidence in the world. The most important, in fact the essential witness was dead. That's the position, Miss Darcy."

Gwen flushed.

"He did say something about that," she admitted. "But he

wrapped it up in such pompous language, and I couldn't pin him down to anything definite—I'm afraid I didn't really believe him. I thought he was only trying to put me off. Everyone tries to put me off. But there must be some way of making these brutes who killed Janet—yes, they killed her—there must be some way of making them pay now we've found them."

"I'm going to show you the way," Salter said with quiet confidence. "I want you to help me."

"How?"

"First, by stopping your own investigation, then by taking such action as I may ask you to. If you and Mr. Merrow go on, if you don't come to trouble yourselves, you'll scare them away too soon."

"I'll do anything you damned well like if you'll guarantee to get these beasts punished," Gwen said fiercely.

"Thank you, Miss Darcy," Salter said. "I'm very grateful to you. I think my chances of getting these people are much improved by what I've heard in this room this afternoon."

2

Mr. Francis Salter's first instructions were unexciting. He wanted Gwen to go back to London. When she protested he explained patiently.

"You see I want whoever may be interested in you to lose that interest," he said. "So long as you are here for no apparent reason they will be suspicious. This isn't a holiday hotel; I don't imagine you often have people staying for more than a few nights, do you, Mr. Merrow?"

"No. That's true. But Miss Darcy has a very good reason for being here. She is something of an authority in interior decorating and she's undertaken some work for me here."

Salter nodded. "That's another story," he said. "What sort of work?"

"Curtains, carpets, redecoration of the bedrooms and some refurnishings," Gwen said.

"Have you started work?"

"Not yet."

"Then make an obvious start at once," Salter urged. "Something that will get talked about. Can you manage it?"

"Certainly," Merrow put in. "We'll begin to-morrow—to-day if you like."

"Fine. And if you can make use of some of the Wilborough shops, all the better. I want it talked about."

"I'll see to it. And what do you want me to do?" Merrow asked.

"Carry on with your job and keep your eyes and ears open. I can't say any more at the moment. What I'm trying to do is to still any suspicions that may be in the mind of interested parties, shall I say? that you and Miss Darcy have been doing—well, what you have been doing. I don't doubt that some people have been guessing. I want them to believe that they have been guessing wrong."

"Yes. I can see that. All right, Mr. Salter——"

"Pollock, please," Salter smiled. "That's very important."

"Sorry," Merrow said.

"Now, sir," Salter turned to Philip Argent. "Can you spare me an hour. I want to check some of these facts with you—Nurse Marshall is new to me, and very significant."

"Certainly, I'm entirely at your disposal."

"Then perhaps——" Salter debated with himself for a moment "——no need to advertise the fact that we're going together. You've got your car here, if I walk about half a mile along the Wilborough road perhaps you'd pick me up."

"Very good."

"I'll start at once."

Since she had received him Gwen saw Argent off ten minutes later. She mentioned casually to Stephen as she came back through the hall that he was an old friend who was staying at Oldford.

Merrow from his window watched Argent drive away and felt a sense of deep relief that the Janet Warren affair had been so completely taken out of his and Gwen's hands. If only he could make Gwen feel the same, all would be well. That detective fellow was quite right; this was no business in which amateurs should meddle. He felt years younger as he went down to join Gwen. He could get back to the affairs of the Black Boy again. He and she would consult Stephen about Wilborough shops, and he would help Gwen to take some measurements for curtains for the dining room, later that night perhaps. That would satisfy Salter's demands, and he never had liked the dining room curtains. All the old enthusiasm surged back. Life was going to be peaceful and good once more.

3

Half a mile or so along the Wilborough road Argent slowed his car. Salter slid into it almost before it had stopped. "Carry on, sir," he said curtly.

Argent let in the clutch.

"Well, Salter, what do you make of it all and what do you want of me?" he asked.

Salter said, "More about this Marshall woman." He hesitated for a moment. "Could you manage to spare me an hour or two. It might help a lot. I was wondering if you would have dinner with me."

"Very nice of you, Salter. Yes, I can manage so long as you let me telephone home to let 'em know I shan't be back. Where do we dine; the Black Boy?"

"No, Sir Philip: the Beach Hotel, Shinglemouth."

"Ho ho! But what about clothes, Salter? It's a devilish smart place, I've always heard."

"That's all right, sir. I was over there about a week ago. Lots of men don't change. We just happen to find ourselves there at dinner time and drop in. That's the idea. We shan't be conspicuous."

"Well, you know best. Now what about Nurse Marshall?"

Mr. Francis Salter extracted from Argent in the next half hour a great deal about Nurse Marshall.

Argent spoke highly of her work in the earlier days, a hard woman, but firm and one who could be relied upon to obey orders.

"I was well satisfied with her work and I was glad enough to send her patients when she started that Nursing Home at Shinglemouth," he said. "But she began to deteriorate there. She made too much money at first and it went to her head. She spent it like a fool and began neglecting her work—always going away for holidays and leaving the Home to subordinates."

"She was getting in with a rotten flashy racing crowd too. I saw some of them down there from time to time. They used to come ostensibly as patients and they turned the place into a bear garden—drink, cards, and heaven knows what else. I didn't enquire. But I broke with her and told her why, and tried to give her some advice. Other doctors dropped her too. The place went smash and she went bankrupt. I lost sight of her years ago."

"I see. Very illuminating," Salter said. "I shouldn't be surprised if this partnership with Charlton began there. He always ran with the sort of crowd you describe so far as our records go. You don't associate him with the place in any way, do you, doctor?"

Argent shook his head.

"I'm good at faces but not at names. I don't recall the name but I might the face."

"Maybe you'll get a sight of him sometime," Salter said cryptically. "You'd know Marshall, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Would she know you?"

"Without doubt."

"Let's hope you don't meet then."

They had run the car across the marshland and along a rough road that served the cluster of cottages that made Shinglemouth until they came to its end in a waste of beach that seemed to stretch into barren infinity.

The beach itself was still dotted with a few lingering holiday-makers. Half a dozen cars were parked close by the ancient weather-board Smack Inn, and nearly half a mile away to the left the great raw concrete block of the Beach Hotel broke the level skyline.

It was a good place in which to sit and talk, unnoticed and undisturbed, with the grey green North Sea beating lazily on the shingle and off shore a graceful tan-sailed barge making her way steadily down the coast.

Salter seemed to have finished his questioning and was glancing through the notes he had made. Argent, smoking and thinking by his side, suddenly realised that the gaunt villa that had been Nurse Marshall's Nursing Home had disappeared.

He commented on this.

"I suppose they must have bought the place and pulled it down when they built the hotel," he said, and pointed out where it had stood.

Salter said, "That's not unimportant. You don't happen to know who owns the Beach, I suppose?"

"Haven't the least idea. I haven't set eyes on this place for getting on ten years."

Salter shuffled together his notes.

"Well, I've got a strong feeling that my answer's there," he said, and nodded in the direction of the hotel. "Things all keep on pointing that way."

"Do you mean that rogue Logan's there?"

"I shouldn't be surprised."

"And you think it was he who was blackmailing Miss—Warren—not Charlton?"

"Same thing and I'm sure of it. The same old gang's at the same old work again. But until I can find Logan I can't make my next move. I've got to find him."

"Look here, Salter, I don't want to ask questions you must not answer, but what exactly is the position?"

4

Salter lit a cigarette and puffed at it in silence for a moment or so. Then:

"The position's this, doctor. As I told them, so far as your

young friends are concerned, no matter what evidence they might collect—there's no one to prosecute. The lady's dead.

"It seems a perfectly clear case on the face of it, money for jam to the Logan crowd. Only thing that surprises me is that a woman with her knowledge of life should have fallen for it. She must have known they'd go on bleeding her. She might just as well have chucked her hand in at once and confessed to her fiancé. But they won't do it: you can't make them see it, doctor. And God knows I've tried to make 'em again and again."

"Do you agree that she committed suicide, Salter?"

"I know you don't think she was that sort, but it looks like it. It may have been accident. There's no getting away from the fact that she'd been drinking. I haven't gone into it, of course, but it doesn't seem to me that she was absolutely sober when she came to the Black Boy. But that wants proving."

"But why did she go to the Black Boy?"

"If I were on the case I'd want to know that too. It might be significant, it might not. But with drunks you never know what they're going to do or why they do it—but you'd know that better than I do," Salter added apologetically.

"Unfortunately, I do," Argent said. "Possibly you're right about her condition, but she appears to have behaved quite rationally in most ways. Under great stress—yes; but I should say her mind was clear enough. There are several inconsistencies in Miss Darcy's story that I find hard to explain."

"For heaven's sake don't mention them to her just now," Salter said. "If I'm going to get this bunch I've got to stop her and Merrow butting in. Mark you, I'm not saying that they haven't done remarkably well for amateurs. The girl's got brains. Her stunt for getting a look at the hotel register was clever; I'd dearly like to have an hour with that book myself. But if they go on they're going to spoil everything. They've got someone uneasy about them already; Charlton's telephone conversation as good as proves that. I'd be obliged, doctor, if you'd help me to sheer them off."

"I'll do my best but I may not find it easy. She's a curious character, that young woman, and this business of—avenging—her friend; that's what it amounts to, Salter, is something of an obsession. If I may suggest, I'd invent a few harmless jobs for her to do. Merrow's a different proposition. In first judgment I'd say he'd be glad to be out of it. His obsession's his nice old inn."

"Got some small interest in the lady too, I should say," Salter said with a grin. "At least that's how it struck me."

"Well—I won't disagree with you there, Salter."

"I didn't think you would. Now about this case. You'll understand, doctor, that I mustn't give you any details, but I can tell you that the client's a man in a big way in a large provincial town, and you can take it from me that the methods they're using are almost identical with those used with Miss Warren. Funny what one track minds even the cleverest of crooks have. But it's the same tactics—the photograph, only of incriminating papers in this case, the same typewritten chits about account overdue and the same threat at the end of them, and the same meeting to hand over the cash in a lonely place where you can't have witnesses."

"So your man has been bled?"

"Yes, he's paid twice on our advice. He has put himself entirely in our hands and though he's more than a bit of a rogue he's got guts. And he's got sense too. He doesn't want the small fry, he wants to smash the whole gang because he knows he won't be safe until he has. My instructions are to get cast iron evidence then he'll go to the police and prosecute. And it isn't an easy job, sir."

"I suppose not."

"I've got to link up the whole bunch and then lay my trap, and with a man like Logan we're not going to have any cupboards to hide in, like the Yard's so fond of, to get evidence. I shouldn't be surprised if Charlton doesn't use that yacht of his to do a bit of filthy business in. Perfect place to talk without any chance of being overheard."

"Yes," Argent said, frowning. "Yes, it would be."

"Well, let's get along and see what a good dinner will do for for us, shall we, doctor?" Salter said cheerily. "I'm going to concentrate on the Beach Hotel."

Argent began to back the car.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I

SALTER was right. In the dining room of the Beach Hotel there were half a dozen or more other men who had not changed into conventional black and white.

They were given a not very attractive table in an alcove near the door, but it suited them, for it gave an excellent view of everyone who entered or left the room, and they were not conspicuous. Salter chose the dinner.

He was a good host, and an experienced one. He ordered a simple meal, salmon trout with a grilled chicken to follow and

he recommended a chablis, a Vaudesir that he had tried on a previous visit, and Argent found it excellent.

The doctor was intensely interested in the company.

"This place is even more unusual than I'd been led to believe," he said after a first look round. "I could name you several people here, all well known, but I don't think they're going to help you. Incidentally, some of them know me. Does that matter?"

"Not a bit, sir. You live in the neighbourhood, why shouldn't you dine here? I could name one or two of them myself—not necessarily in connection with my profession any more than those you know with yours." He smiled ingenuously. "We both know a bit about the seamy side of life, doctor."

"We do, Salter."

They had come to their meal late and the room was beginning to empty before they were half through their own dinner. Once a man waved to Argent as he went out, once a woman looked at him, smiled nervously in recognition, and hurried on. Salter noted both but said nothing.

But he kept up an entertaining commentary on the foibles of human nature, and Argent found him an amusing companion and he realised, too, a kindred art. Salter was talking lightly and divertingly to put Argent at his ease, so that he might not feel self-conscious or strained. Argent talked to his patients in much the same manner for much the same reason.

But the evening appeared not to be productive. Argent said so. Salter replied, "Plenty of time yet. I've spotted one man I hope you'll know when he comes out."

"Where?"

"No, no, doctor. Wait. You can't see him clearly from here. He's got someone with him I can't see. But I think they are going to make a move. Yes—Now be careful, sir. This fellow coming along now. The tall, good-looking man like an actor. Don't say anything till he's——" He broke off abruptly.

"What's up, Salter?" Argent asked.

"Nothing, sir. Nothing. Just a thought."

Argent chose his moment, raised his glass and his eyes with it. He saw a man, as Salter had said, suggesting an actor, with sleek dark greying hair and an air of self-confidence. Neither he nor the woman with him was in dinner dress. They passed through the door into the wide Lounge beyond.

"Know him?" Salter asked quietly.

"Afraid not."

"Pity. That's Charlton."

"Was it, by gad. Sorry, Salter: he arouses no memory. Who was the woman?"

Salter concentrated attention on his plate.

"I've just had a bit of good luck, doctor. A very good bit of luck. I've been wondering about her. She used to work for Logan in the City. His secretary, a woman named Marks. She's the woman who's been dealing with my client, I'll bet a fiver. I always suspected it though his description didn't quite tally. So they're all in it and I'll swear Logan himself isn't a hundred miles away. Sorry you couldn't place Charlton. You're quite sure?"

Argent made no answer and Salter looked up to see him staring towards the Lounge. A dark, harassed-looking man in evening dress was speaking to the head waiter by the door.

Argent said softly, "I've spotted someone for you at last."

"Who?"

"That foreign-looking chap talking to the waiter. I know his face as well as I know yours but I'm hanged if I can recall his name. He was a patient at the Nursing Home. Not one of mine. Damn, what is the fellow's name."

"Leone," Salter said.

"That's right. Leone. He was manager of a restaurant in town. Nervous case. Insomnia and bad breakdown. He and Marshall became very friendly. She used to go up to his restaurant afterwards and he made a devil of a fuss of her. She used to boast about it. Leone, that's the name, Gulio Leone."

"He is manager of this hotel and supposed to be the owner."

"What? By gad, Salter, that's significant——"

"Very significant," Salter broke in. "Get on with your food, doctor; he's coming in."

Mr. Leone and his head waiter came just inside the door. They stood within a few yards of Argent and Salter, talking earnestly in voluble Italian. Argent went stolidly on with his meal. Salter refilled his glass and regarded the honey-coloured wine thoughtfully.

Leone was in the room for little more than a minute. When he had gone Argent said:

"Couldn't catch what they were saying, I suppose? Italian wasn't it?"

Salter nodded.

"I got most of it," he said. "Leone apparently has a headache; he thinks it's the heat. He is going out in half an hour for a little run in his car to take the air. It is probable that he may be late in returning and he wishes some paté sandwiches and a small bottle of champagne left in his room in case he feels like it when he comes in. The rest was about some complaint from one of the guests who thought she had been kept waiting

for her dinner too long. I judged she was always complaining. That's all."

"Not very illuminating," Argent said.

"I'm not so sure of that," Salter responded. "I hate to rush a good dinner, but I think I'd like to know which way he's going. Do you mind?"

"Not a bit, Salter. We'll cut out coffee and get off."

2

There were only two cars left in the hotel car park when Argent and Salter reached it. A brilliant light on the side of the building showed up Argent's little saloon and a biggish powerful-looking car drawn up close by the wall. Salter exclaimed when he saw it:

"That's Charlton's car," he said. "I know it. Now I wonder—Do you mind if I drive, doctor? I've got a scheme."

"Not a bit," Argent said. "I'm in your hands."

Salter explained when they had turned from the hotel grounds on to the bare road that winds across the marsh. It was all but dark and he drove slowly.

"It's not a question of following Leone if we're lucky enough to catch him," he said. "It's too risky—the odds are they'd spot us after a time. But I want to know which way he's going. I shouldn't be surprised if Charlton's taking him to his boat. If they head that way we'll let them get ahead and jog on after them—if you don't mind running me that far. You can leave me there, I'll find my own way back—in the morning probably. Now this is the idea."

By the reed-thatched cottage where Gwen Darcy had picked up Milly Claxton, the road curves steeply up a hill to join the main road a mile short of Whindleford village. The rise is narrow between high banks. Salter's scheme was to stop their car at the top, come back on foot until he could get a view of the marsh road and watch for approaching headlights.

"There aren't going to be many cars coming from Shinglemouth at this time of night," he said. "We'll take a chance on the first one unless it looks obviously dud. I can get back to you as soon as I see it coming, we pull out when we hear them on the hill, let them pass us and see what happens. If they turn left at the main road the odds are they're making for Wodenbridge."

They came to the cottage, and Salter changed down as the car began to feel the steep rise.

He chose his place on the top, on the edge of a stretch of

open heathland, and left the doctor. But he was back almost at once.

"We've only just done it," he said. "There's a car coming fast: big headlights. Let's hope it's Charlton's." He climbed in and pressed the self-starter.

They heard the approaching car a minute later, saw the gleam of headlights behind, and Salter drew out on to the road.

Deliberately he kept the crown even when he heard the angry scream of a horn behind him; he wanted to make that car behind slow before it passed him, and he succeeded. As it went by he caught a glimpse of Charlton at the wheel and two people in the back. In his headlights he picked out the rear number and repeated it.

"That's Charlton all right, and Leone and Marks are with him. Now then, right or left?" He accelerated.

The car ahead was moving very fast; its lights grew fainter. But they saw it check at the entrance to the main road, then the lights swung right.

"Wash out," Salter said. "Another good theory gone wrong. Oh well, I'll push her along a bit further, but we'll never be able to pick that car up. He's heading for the London road and that means anywhere. Except——" He seemed to be thinking aloud rather than speaking to Argent. "—except Leone's coming back to-night. Latish though, but alone. He only ordered sandwiches for one. Who's going to drive him back?" He was silent for a while. Then: "Doctor," he went on, "if we don't get a sight of them in the next few minutes I'll get you to let me run back to the top of the hill and leave me. I want to see what time Leone comes back and how."

He drove on, pushing the car as hard as he could. They went through Whindleford village and out into open country once more, but it was clear that the chase had outpaced them. At the crossing of the London road Salter stopped and turned.

"No good going any further," he said; "anyhow it wouldn't have been wise to follow. But I may pick up something yet."

"I'm not going to desert you now, Salter," Argent protested. "I'm interested in this in two senses. I want to get Logan, and frankly I'm enjoying seeing how you work. You won't be out all night, I suppose."

"No. He ought to be back by midnight. He'd have warned his head waiter if he were going to be very late."

"All right then. I told my family to expect me when they saw me, and I'm damned if I'm going to let you walk back to Wilford."

"That's devilish decent of you, sir," Salter said. "If you could stand by it would help a lot."

He explained as he drove at a more leisurely pace back towards Whindleford that he didn't hope to get a lot, but from the time that Leone returned he could get some idea of the distance he had travelled.

"Say that car averages an outside forty-five to fifty on these roads, and that's putting it high, it will give me a maximum circumference from Shinglemouth within which I'm assuming Logan is to-night. It isn't much, but every little helps. Also, Leone's got to be brought back. Half my job's testing theories that don't come off."

"More than half mine's the same," Argent laughed.

They had reached the village when suddenly Salter exclaimed, "Good lord! What a fool! See that, doctor?"

"No. What?"

"Outside the pub there. Charlton's car. And I went buzzing by at fifty ten minutes ago," He slowed and pulled the car in by the side of the road. "I'm going to have a drink and see what this means. We'd better not both go."

2

Argent was left alone wondering for fully ten minutes. Frankly he was thoroughly enjoying his experiences. And he was enjoying Salter's company.

He liked the man's lack of conceit. He didn't profess to be infallible. But he was immensely patient and painstaking. Argent could appreciate that better than most men.

When at last Salter reappeared he was subdued.

"There's some funny business going on here," he said. "Charlton is there alone: obviously killing time over large whiskies. As obviously Leone and the girl can't be there, he wouldn't go to a village pub so close to his posh hotel. Everyone would talk about it. Looks as if our people are somewhere in this neighbourhood though. I must check possible houses to-morrow. But we'll wait and see the next move. I think we'll turn and run back a bit so as to have our car facing the same way as his. There's a doctor's house not far along. Cars outside doctors' houses aren't unusual. Local busybodies will think it's a patient's. I don't want to be conspicuous."

Salter brought the car to a stop again about a hundred yards beyond the inn in the shade of a couple of great ilex trees, and they settled down to wait. The inn was doing a brisk trade that summer night. From time to time passing motorists pulled up for a drink. An occasional cyclist stopped and when the church clock struck ten there was a small exodus of villagers. But still Charlton's car remained.

Salter was standing in the road screened by the doctor's saloon, his eyes fixed on the inn's door. At last Argent heard him say softly, "Stand by, sir; he's coming now," and a few minutes later Charlton's car went by quite slowly. Salter gave him a short start and went in pursuit.

They passed him a short mile along the road. He had backed into a lane and was turning. Salter swore softly as he went by.

"I'm afraid he's done us," he said, "but we'll have a shot to pick him up." He switched off his headlights, ran bumping over the grass verge, just managed to turn without backing, and just escaped a smash with another car that came fast driving towards the village.

"That was a near thing," Argent said, but Salter did not answer. His eyes were on the distant headlights. The car was slowing. It stopped. Then the lights disappeared. Round a bend in the road their own lights picked out two figures—Leone and the girl were climbing into Charlton's car—and they caught a fleeting glimpse of the back of the car that had overtaken them turning down the lane.

Charlton had started before they reached him. From the top of the hill where the Shinglemouth road drops to the marsh, Salter saw his blazing headlights speeding on towards the hotel. Five minutes later they were returning. Irene Marks was sitting by Charlton's side as they went by.

Salter went back to Argent.

"Well, that's that," he said. "And I never even got the number of the car they came back in—I couldn't even tell you what it was like: I thought they'd hit us. Oh well, doctor, the best we can say of it is that Logan, if it is Logan, isn't very far away, and I knew that before we started."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I

MERROW served Salter with a whisky and soda later that evening. "Mr. Pollock" apologised for returning at such a late hour. He had, he said, walked into Wilborough, intending to take a bus back in time for dinner. But having missed his bus he had dined there and gone to the local cinema.

"I would have walked home," he added ingenuously, "but I was afraid I should find myself locked out, so I hired a taxi."

Merrow sensed that Salter's story was untrue. It was merely given to provide an explanation of his long absence, and he asked no questions.

He saw him again in the middle of the next morning. Salter found Gwen and Morrow taking measurements for curtains in the dining room. He asked innocently what they were doing and apologised for interrupting. But he wondered, he said, if Mr. Merrow had such a thing as an up-to-date local directory he could borrow. He wanted to look up details of some of the neighbouring churches so that he could take some photographs of any interesting features they might contain.

Again Merrow sensed a reason behind the request, and sent Eve for the directory. "Mr. Pollock" disappeared with it to his room.

Gwen drove into Wilborough after lunch to look at curtain materials at Campbells, Wilborough's biggest furnishing shop.

With Campbells she was more pleased than she had expected to be. It was a branch of a big firm that had branches all over the county, and when, as Salter had suggested, she made known the object of her visit, she was treated with the greatest attention.

Mr. Farmer was sent for. Mr. Farmer was the firm's department manager. He was most interested to hear about the Black Boy

He knew the inn. "A regular picture," he described it. He had been told that it had gone into new hands and he was glad to hear that the new proprietor was going to decorate it in suitable taste.

"We do a good deal of interior decorating for the gentry of the neighbourhood ourselves," he explained proudly, and mentioned several big houses that had been "done" by Campbells. "We did Mr. Baldock's house at Wilford for him a few years ago," he went on. "A most attractive house and quite unique, yes, quite unique." Mr. Farmer repeated the words in the manner of one delivering a grave and considered judgment.

"You would know it, of course, madam?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't. I know where it is, naturally."

Mr. Farmer looked disappointed.

"I should like you to see our treatment of the Lounge. I think you would agree that we struck the right note—the antique motif with modern comfort. It was a privilege to have the contract there. Mr. Baldock gave us a free hand. He is a very good customer of ours."

Gwen did not want to talk about Mr. Baldock nor to see his Lounge. She had just managed, not without some sense of frustration, to put aside thoughts of Janet Warren and to throw herself wholeheartedly into the task of finding proper furnishings for the Black Boy. She agreed vaguely that it must have been highly satisfactory to decorate Mr. Baldock's house and then demanded chintzes.

Mr. Farmer himself helped to display pattern after pattern of chintz. He was a good business-man and he scented new and desirable custom from the old-fashioned pub at Wilford, which he had known chiefly on his occasional visits to the Priors.

Gwen was not easy to please, but Mr. Farmer satisfied her in the end. She spoke of further orders and he promised the utmost attention, adding, "Indeed, madam, the whole of our service is at your disposal. You have only to give us a call on the phone and I will send a man out to you at once to take any measurement or do any work you may require. Or, of course, I would come myself if you wished it."

Gwen was grateful. The shop was good and it was going to prove very convenient. Mr. Farmer came with her to the lift, bowing his thanks. She thanked him and asked if there were a tearoom in the place. She was tired and wanted tea.

Mr. Farmer assured that there was and that Campbell's Tea Lounge was quite famous. "A regular rendezvous," he called it, "for all the best people of the county."

He instructed the lift girl fiercely to show the lady to the Palm Lounge herself.

Gwen thanked him again. She was amused by Mr. Farmer. He took himself and his firm so terribly seriously. She liked the idea of the best people in the county using Campbell's tearooms as a rendezvous. She looked about her, still amused when she entered the Palm Lounge, and the first person she saw was Mr. Baldock.

2

Mr. Baldock, in tweeds that seemed much too heavy for so warm a day, looked hot and wilted. He was peering through his thick-lensed glasses at the menu. She hoped to get by him without being seen. The last thing in the world she wanted was to have to suffer Mr. Baldock just then. She kept her eyes averted as she neared his table. Then by unhappy chance she brushed against a chair upon which Mr. Baldock had placed his hat and stick and knocked the stick to the ground.

She murmured apologies and Baldock was on his feet at once assuring her that it was entirely his fault. And then the recognition came.

There was no getting out of it.

Baldock said, with a smile, "But surely—it's Miss Darcy."

Gwen said stupidly, "Why—it's Mr. Baldock," and as they stood grinning nervously at one another, a waitress settled the matter by pulling out a chair for Gwen.

It was too late then to pass on without some explanation unless

she meant to be frankly rude. Baldock sensed her embarrassment.

"Unless you are meeting friends it would be a great pleasure if you would share my lonely table," he said.

Gwen, inwardly furious, had to accept. It was early and the place was yet half empty. To have gone on would have been too obvious, and after all she would probably be running up against Baldock in Wilford frequently. She couldn't be rude to him. She forced a more convincing smile, and sank into the chair.

"That's awfully sweet of you," she said; "I've been shopping for simply hours and I'm completely exhausted."

"A nice cup of tea will do you all the good in the world," he said.

Gwen did some quick thinking. Janet and the inquest, where last she had seen Baldock, were bound to crop up soon. They'd better get it over quickly she determined, and hurriedly picked the line she was going to take.

"I've been buying curtains for the Black Boy, Mr. Baldock," she said brightly. "I'm worn out."

"Buying curtains?" he queried.

Gwen gave her order to the hovering waitress before she answered:

"Yes. I've got a new job."

Baldock looked confused.

"You see, when poor Miss Warren died I lost my job——"

"Very sad. Very sad," Baldock put in, lugubriously.

"But Mr. Merrow offered me another. I'm an old friend of his sister's, you know, and I'm supposed to know something about interior decorating, so he asked me to undertake the refurnishing of the Black Boy. I think it's going to be fascinating."

It took Mr. Baldock some few moments for this to sink in. She had to explain more fully about Merrow's sister and she implied that she had known that he was at the Black Boy when she came down for the inquest.

"Then that was why your poor friend went there, I suppose?" Mr. Baldock said at length. "I'd no idea of the connection. Indeed I often wondered why she had come there. What a tragedy, what a terrible loss that must have been for you. So sad."

Gwen felt if he said that anything was sad or a loss again, she would scream. He hadn't suffered any loss or pain: his were just meaningless words. She had to stop him. She couldn't let this dreary old man go on with his conventional phrases about tragedy and bereavement as though Janet's death were

an ordinary regrettable accident that might have befallen anybody.

Gwen was bitter in her knowledge of the real tragedy; the more so because of her enforced inaction.

She wanted to say, "You silly old fool—My dear friend, as you call her, was as good as murdered, and the brutes who are responsible are still at large." But she nerved herself to play a part.

Very quietly she said, "Mr. Baldock, Miss Warren is dead, and all her friends miss her terribly. I was her closest friend. But mourning and lamenting won't bring her back to life again. I feel rather curiously about these things. Perhaps you'll think I'm hard. I can't help it if you do. But I'm trying to forget Miss Warren. You see my livelihood is going to keep me at Wilford for some weeks at any rate. And I've got to come face to face with all sorts of things connected with her all the time. And if I'm going to let myself become morbid I can't do my work properly and I'm going to become utterly miserable. I'm not going to be morbid. I'm alive and I want to enjoy my life. After all we've all got to die sometime. So—shall we not talk about Miss Warren, in a gloomy way, I mean. You do understand, don't you?"

Mr. Baldock apparently did not understand. He looked shocked at first.

"Er—er—yes. Quite," he said. "Yes, very sensible of you. He brightened a little. "I see what you mean. To remember only the happy hours. I think that a very beautiful thought. I am sure your dear friend would have wished it." Gwen winced. "Yes. Yes." Mr. Baldock having propounded the idea was evidently determined to elaborate it. "You are very brave, and so right, not to brood over your loss."

Gwen gave up the fight. Clearly nothing could stop the wretched man. She concentrated on her tea, putting in an occasional "Yes," "No," or "of course," while Mr. Baldock extolled Janet Warren and invented a character for her which she had never possessed.

"I feel myself privileged to have known her if only for those few minutes," he said. "Tired as she was, she seemed to find rest in my garden. She loved the simple things of life, I could tell that. And the beautiful things. How interested she would have been in your present task at that picturesque old inn."

That was one of the moments when Gwen interpolated "Yes, of course."

"I recall quite clearly," Mr. Baldock went on, his teacup half raised, a reminiscent smile on his face, "how she drew my attention to the evening light on a bed of gladioli. With the

true artist's vision she saw shades of colour in it that escaped my dull eyes."

His prosy rambling began to fascinate Gwen. She found herself listening with growing interest, and began to make comments, provocatively, almost as though she were baiting him.

She mentioned various flowers which she said had been Janet's favourites—phlox and carnations, delphiniums and marigolds, and Baldock droned on.

Gwen said, "She was particularly fond of marigolds: she loved their rich colour. She always spoke of them by the old names, golds or marybuds."

"Yes. Yes. I remember her doing so. She admired my *calendulae* greatly. Do you know I had never before heard them called golds."

"I always thought it rather affected of her," Gwen laughed.

"Indeed I don't agree with you. I thought it charming—so in keeping with her whole character, if I may say so. But then perhaps I have more than a passion for old days and old ways. And I have never forgiven myself for boring her about the history of the old priory."

"I'm sure you didn't bore her, Mr. Baldock. Janet would have loved it."

"But I did, my dear young lady. She became restless. I should have let her sit there quietly in the garden, not urged her to go on to see the ruins. I sensed it. I knew it." Mr. Baldock sighed. "But we mustn't talk about the sad things."

"I don't know that it's sad," Gwen said brusquely. "You've just told me of what must have been a very happy time for Janet. She was tired and she rested in what sounds a very very peaceful spot. She must have been quite happy then. Didn't she seem happy?"

"Well, yes, yes. I think she did. She relaxed. I thought her overtired at first; she had a strained expression. She told me she had found the heat most trying. But yes, yes, Miss Darcy, you are right. I think that brief time she spent in my garden was a happy one."

"I'm sure it was, Mr. Baldock," Gwen said definitely. "I hope I'm not going to shock you, but one must try and be honest and face facts. Don't you really think hers was rather a nice death?" He looked startled. "I mean how much nicer that way than lingering on through a painful illness—like so many people do. As you've told it to me, Janet must have been very happy, very peaceful: rested after a tiring time. And then suddenly—she went out. She can hardly have known anything."

Just a moment of shock—well, I'd as soon die that way when my time comes, Mr. Baldock." She finished fiercely.

Mr. Baldock seemed at a loss for words.

"I—er—yes. Perhaps I'm a little old-fashioned, but I do agree there is much in what you say."

"At any rate that's what I believed happened," Gwen went on. "And I'm going to think of her end in that way. I don't believe in mourning, it's nearly all self-indulgence——"

"Yes, that is true," he interrupted.

"It's absolutely true. Now may I ask a favour?"

"Of course. Of course."

Gwen seemed rather to enjoy the confusion she was creating in Mr. Baldock's mind. He was so obviously puzzled and unable to follow her varying moods.

"I want to come and see your garden and your lovely flowers. I want to see where Janet spent those last happy minutes. May I—sometime?"

"Why certainly, Miss Darcy. It would give me very great pleasure. I would say to-morrow but I'm going away for a few days—only a few days, a week perhaps, to Wales, to see an old friend who is ill. Though of course that need not make any difference. I was thinking of myself. I should like to be there to show you. But you must go whenever you like. I'll tell Cummings. You must use the garden as your own—in memory of your dear friend."

"How kind of you," Gwen murmured.

"And as soon as I return I shall look forward to seeing much of you. I am a lonely man. You and that charming young fellow, Merrow, must come to dinner."

"I'm sure Hugh would love to come."

"I do hope he'll make a success of this venture of his," Baldock said earnestly. "It's a risk; it's a risk but he seems to have his head screwed on the right way. And with you to help him——"

Gwen finished her tea. She had had more than enough of Mr. Baldock's company. She managed to keep him talking about the Black Boy and Merrow's plans until at length she bade him good-bye.

He shook her hand warmly.

"I cannot tell you how much I have enjoyed this talk," he said. "And you must let me say that I admire you for your courage. You have given me much to think about." He sighed. "There is something fine about the frank honesty of your generation."

Gwen tried to look duly impressed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I

SALTER had lunched early that day. Merrow saw him driving off from the inn soon after one. Gwen had gone more than an hour later, and Merrow was looking forward to a pleasant, not too busy afternoon of odd jobs and clearing off back correspondence. But Salter interfered with that simple scheme.

Eve came up to Merrow's room in the middle of the afternoon to say that Mr. Pollock was asking for him.

"He said to say that if you were busy it didn't matter," Eve explained. "It's about the photos he's been taking, I think. He's been to get them from somewhere. He showed me some. They're ever so lovely. Real pictures."

Merrow sighed. It was no good. He couldn't escape this wretched business.

"Ask him to come up, Eve," he said, putting aside a half finished letter. "I should like to see the photographs. I'm thinking of getting Mr. Pollock to let me have picture post-cards made from some of them."

Eve brightened.

"What, to sell here?" she queried. "That would be nice. I'm sure they'd go well, sir. Everyone admires the old beams so."

Salter came in a few minutes later, a sheaf of photographic prints in his hand.

"Well, Mr. Pollock," Merrow said, as the door closed. "I hear you've made some marvellous pictures of my ancient inn."

Salter smiled.

"As a matter of fact, I have," he said, "but that's not what I wanted to see you about."

"So I imagined."

"And so I imagined." Salter took the big chair Merrow offered. "There have been developments in this case in the last twenty-four hours," he said. "One concerns Miss Darcy. I want to talk to you and her about it. I've traced one link between this place and the Beach Hotel, an unexpected one—Leone the manager."

"Leone? How?"

"He is an associate of Charlton's. He was with him last night, and I've got a very strong suspicion—though I can't prove it—he was with Logan too. Now you see what that may imply."

Merrow frowned. "Good Lord!" he said. "Yes, I do."

You mean Miss Darcy's visit to the hotel. He may have suspected her reason."

"More than likely. He'd have counted it an odd coincidence anyhow. I want to ask her some questions about it. If she's in could you get her up here now?"

"She isn't in. She's gone over to Wilborough to see about curtain fabrics. But she ought to be back for tea or very soon after."

"I'd like to see her as soon as she comes in."

"She'll come here when she does," Merrow said.

Salter said, "There are one or two matters I'd like to get more clear with you. This daughter of Paternoster's—Milly Claxton—in view of Leone don't you think it is possible she is talking about what goes on here. He's her boss. I don't say she's talking direct to him, but well: it's another remarkable coincidence."

Merrow was forced to agree, though he insisted that he was certain that Milly would in no way knowingly act the spy.

Salter did not argue. "There is a leakage here somewhere. I was always convinced of it," he said. "That's why it's so necessary for you and Miss Darcy to be particularly careful. Now tell me, will you, what you know about Charlton and this fellow Linton who was supposed to be acting for him."

Merrow elaborated the information he had given Salter on the previous afternoon, and Salter pressed him for the smallest details. He talked about Jimmy Bailey too. He had only just mentioned the incident at their earlier meeting. Now under Salter's questioning he told the whole story. Salter listened with a maddening lack of comment.

The most Merrow could get out of him was a reluctant, "It would be interesting to know if the man did mean anything, but if he turns up again I'd rather you didn't ask him. Leave it to me."

As to the fight at the cottage. Salter appeared to take the view of the constable, Hawes. There was nothing to be done unless Jimmy complained.

Merrow rang for Eve and ordered tea to be brought up. He told Eve, pointing to the photographs deliberately spread about, that Mr. Pollock was going to let them make postcards, and Eve laughed at the funny way in which Mr. Pollock said that he felt highly honoured to think that his poor efforts were going to become so famous.

Salter spoke seriously to Merrow about trying to keep Gwen from interfering in the case any more, and he told him what Argent had said about inventing tasks for her.

"But," he added, "she couldn't do better than stick to this

furnishing job. I want Logan and his crowd really to believe that."

He confided in Merrow what had happened at the Beach Hotel overnight and said that he had spent some hours that day in making quiet enquiries about possible houses in the radius he computed might have been covered by the car in which Leone and Irene Marks had travelled.

"But I drew blank," he admitted. "Yes, I'm sure the devil's somewhere about and I'm not too certain he isn't at the hotel itself. I've asked Holborn—our headquarters—to send a man there to spend a day or two, and see if anyone has a private suite. A big hotel's a mighty good hide so long as you're not suspected *and* are in with the management."

Gwen found the two men still talking in a room thick with smoke, despite the open windows, when she returned from Wilborough. She looked eager and a little flushed.

Merrow greeted her quietly.

"Glad you've come, Gwen," he said. "Mr.—er—Pollock wants to see you about something."

"And I want to see him about something," she answered quickly. "Mr. Pollock, what do you know about Mr. Baldock?"

2

"Baldock!" Merrow exclaimed. "Why Baldock?"

Salter said, "Why the question, Miss Darcy?"

"Well, what do you know about him?"

"Nothing. Except the evidence he gave at Miss Warren's inquest and that he lives in the house by the old ruins. What do you know about him?"

"But didn't you go over to his place to take photographs yesterday?" Merrow put in.

"Yes. But I didn't see the man. I saw a gardener, who said he was out, but that I was at liberty to go where I liked. A very civil fellow. But what's in Miss Darcy's mind?"

Gwen answered in a small, rather diffident voice:

"You'll laugh at me, I dare say. But I don't care if you do. I believe Mr. Baldock is the man you were talking about yesterday: the man who was really blackmailing Janet. Logan, you said he was."

"Oh, I say, Gwen," Merrow said incredulously. "No, damn it all—why Baldock's well known. What exactly——"

Salter cut him short.

"Go on, Miss Darcy, this is most interesting. What makes you think so?" he asked steadily.

"Give me a cigarette, Hugh," she said. "I feel a bit jittery."

It was in a way a bit of a shock. I'll tell you. Mr. Salter, I've been trying to get it straight all the way home in the car. But I can't. I'll have to give it to you in bits. You must stick it together. First Janet went there from here, didn't she?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Why?"

Salter shook his head.

"She went to see him, to face him. That's why she took those drinks. To brace herself up——"

"But this is only surmise, Miss Darcy."

"I know. I know it is. But I'm coming to facts in a minute. I've got to tell it to you as I see it." She puffed nervously at her cigarette. "You remember Baldock's evidence?"

"Roughly, yes."

"Well, I remember every word of it. There were a lot of lies in it. So there were in mine. I was trying to keep back anything that might make it seem that Janet killed herself, though I was pretty sure she had. I said all sorts of things that weren't absolutely true. And I thought he was doing the same thing—being kind—nobody likes to make out that people, decent people are batty—unsound mind, you know. I mentioned it to you. Didn't I, Hugh?"

"Yes, you did."

"But what particularly in the evidence?" Salter asked.

"About what she talked about to Baldock. Being interested in flowers and gardens, and old buildings. And asking if this inn had anything to do with the Priory. Janet didn't know or care a damn thing about gardens and flowers and old buildings, and what's more, she hated them. He made the whole thing up."

"Yes, quite, Miss Darcy," Salter said patiently. "But on your saying you made up things too."

"Yes, I know I did and I had a good reason for it. But what reason has Mr. Baldock for going on making them up. He's been lying to me steadily for over half an hour this afternoon."

Salter queried sharply, "You've seen him this afternoon?"

"Yes, but don't worry. I didn't give anything away. I ran against him in Campbell's tearooms in Wilborough and we had tea together. I told him all about what I was doing there; and all about knowing Hugh and working here, and I tried to keep him off Janet, but he would talk about her. And he told me the most absolute lies. I wasn't frightfully interested at first, he talked such awfully slimy hypocritical stuff about my sad loss. You know the sort of stuff. And then it suddenly came to me that he was lying for a purpose. I'd said something futile about her having been happy talking to him in his garden and having

a really happy death, and I saw him start. He knew why she died.

"I'd been leading him on. He said Janet drew his attention to the colour of some early gladioli. Janet didn't know a gladiolus from a chrysanthemum. I made him tell me more of what she'd said about flowers. I said she was particularly fond of marigolds and always called them marybuds or golds. He said he remembered her doing so. Now, Mr. Salter, "Gwen leaned forward to emphasize her words. "I knew Janet Warren as well as anybody—better. She disliked flowers and knew nothing about them, I tell you. I think they must have been connected in her mind with that cottage at Chaldean. Doctor Argent thinks so too. But Janet couldn't have told a marigold from a buttercup and she'd just as likely to have known the old names for them as to have known the—the names in Chinese. It was absolutely against all her character. The whole of that story that man told was false. I don't believe she ever sat in his garden at all. I—I—" She broke off suddenly. "Oh, I know it all seems so utterly weak now I'm telling it but I'm right, I'm sure I'm right."

Salter shook his head.

"Don't think that for a moment," he said. "It's far from weak. Go on. Tell me everything you can think of to support your theory. I'm interested. I agree with you: the man had a reason for lying. I want to know that reason."

Gwen smiled gratefully.

"I look at it this way," she went on. "Mr. Baldock answers so many questions I've been asking myself. Why she came here—to the last place she'd have come normally. She was always jibing about the filthy food you got at inns like this. She said they were always smelly and primitive and had no comforts, and she loved food and comfort. She came to see Mr. Baldock.

"Why did she go for that walk after dinner. She hated walking alone, in the country particularly. She was afraid she'd meet a cow and she was terrified of cows." Salter smiled. "It's true, though. Then she asked about ruins. Janet would have gone miles to avoid them. Yet she went to Baldock's. Then you talked about someone here spying on us—you suggested Milly Claxton. Why should Milly spy? But Mr. Baldock's man, Cummings, is here regularly. Mr. Paternoster was talking about him last night. They're great friends."

"That's true enough," Merrow said, looking worried. "But——"

"Why shouldn't he be the spy? I'll bet there's little that goes on here that isn't common gossip. Anyhow it's so perfectly obvious. I mean Janet having a row with Charlton, so Milly

says, and she left him sitting on the beach looking furious. That means he didn't get what he wanted. Then later she comes on here to have it out with Baldock. But she didn't get what she hoped for and—well—she killed herself. She probably told him she was going to. Anyhow he knew, and he had to put up these lies to save nasty questions. And they did save them. Everyone thought he was a kind old bore. Mr. Salter, I studied that man this afternoon. He isn't kind—he's got cruel eyes. And he was watching me like a cat. Every time I said something wild I could see he was thinking quickly, wondering what I meant. Go on—say I'm an imaginative fool——”

Salter said brusquely, “I think there's a fifty-fifty chance that I'm a fool. I hadn't thought of Baldock. Let's just go over Miss Warren's movements that day.”

3

He turned to Merrow.

“Do you know what time she arrived here?”

“Not exactly. Stephen might tell us. It would have been before seven. I went out for a walk about five and sat in the woods for an hour or more. I got back just after seven and she had been here some time then.”

“Did Milly Claxton say when she saw her leave Charlton?”

“It would have been the middle of the afternoon. Milly had gone to bathe in her time off. She wouldn't get off before half-past two, I imagine, and she had finished her bathe when it happened. Probably half-past three to four,” Gwen said.

“Nothing inconsistent with Miss Darcy's theory, so far as times are concerned. And Miss Warren went out to go to Baldock's at what time?”

“About half-past eight,” Merrow said. “I saw her go.”

“She seems to have been very deliberate about it. She dined first?”

“Yes, and sat over her dinner.”

“Suggests that she knew when to find him at home——”

“But he was home before that,” Merrow interrupted. “I saw him as I was walking back to the inn, a few minutes after seven. He was at his gate talking to a man in a car.”

“See the man?”

“No. He was just leaving. Baldock was seeing him off.”

“Hear what they were talking about?”

“No—well, I caught a phrase or two. Baldock said something didn't seem a very good proposition to him. It struck me, because at the moment I'd just decided to buy this place and it seemed ominous, particularly when the other fellow said it had

got about as much chance as a horse with three legs." Merrow laughed.

Salter looked suddenly very serious.

"The man in the car said that?" he queried sharply.

"Yes."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Salter said. "That expression—I've heard Charlton use it a score of times. It's a favourite phrase of his. There's a direct link."

Gwen said in an excited voice, "Then I was right: he is Logan."

Salter raised a restraining hand.

"Mustn't jump too quickly to conclusions," he said. "What's he like, this man Baldock? Can you describe him?"

Merrow started to answer, but Gwen got in first.

"He's a sandy-haired, rat-faced man, really," she said. "He's going grey. Weak sort of eyes that don't look at you straight. Wears thick glasses."

"Got a beard?"

"No."

"Voice?"

"Dreary and unctuous."

"Not always, Gwen," Merrow broke in. "Pedantic, rather: soft and persuasive."

"He'd be persuasive all right," Salter said cynically. "It sounds as if it might be Logan. He had a beard when I last saw him and there was nothing the matter with his eyes. Hair doesn't quite tally either, but that could be faked. Rat-faced is good. Logan was rat-faced."

"But surely it's easy enough for you to check this if you went up to his house. You'd know him, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. I'd know him, but he might know me. Mustn't risk that till I know a little more." Salter was thoughtful.

"Well, you'd better not waste time, he's going away tomorrow, he said. To Wales, to see a sick friend. Sounded a bit fishy to me when he said so."

"Is he?" Salter answered. "Thanks, Miss Darcy, you don't seem to have missed much. I'll have him looked after. First I'd like to check some times again. You saw him talking to the man in the car just after seven, Mr. Merrow?"

"Say seven to ten past, I—oh damn!" There was a knock at the door and Eve came in.

"Excuse me, sir, but there's Mr. Hawes come, and he'd like to see you for a minute, please. I did say you was engaged, sir, but he said it was rather important," she said.

"Hawes, you mean the policeman?" Merrow asked.

"Yes, sir."

Merrow glanced at Salter. The detective was looking at him in a curious way.

"I'd better go and see what he wants, I suppose," Merrow said.

Salter rose. "You'll want to see him up here, I expect," he said. "We'd better leave you."

Gwen too had got to her feet.

"Of course someone would come just at this minute. Do get rid of him, Hugh," she protested.

"All right, Eve, bring Mr. Hawes up here," Merrow said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I

POLICE CONSTABLE HAWES came in carrying his cap and looking mildly surprised at being brought upstairs.

"Hope I'm not disturbing you, sir, but I've got to ask your help. Jimmy Bailey's landed us in a pack of trouble after all," he said.

"The devil he has. Sit down, Hawes, have a cigarette. What's happened?"

"Jimmy's in Wilborough hospital and it doesn't look as if he's coming out again," Hawes answered bluntly.

"Why not. You mean he's going to die?"

"I'm afraid so, sir, and if he does it's going to be a very serious matter for someone."

"Why? What's the trouble?" Merrow asked anxiously, for the policeman's tone was unmistakably grave.

"Well, sir, from what the house surgeon says if he dies it'll be the result of the crack he got on his head the other night, and you can see what that means."

"Good lord!" Merrow spoke slowly. "That's nasty."

"Very nasty, sir. I've just come back from Wilborough, and the Super there takes a very serious view. There's something behind it that we don't know."

Merrow's frown deepened.

"Tell me the details, will you, Hawes?" he said quietly.

Hawes produced a notebook and scanned it to refresh his memory.

"Jimmy was found unconscious in a barn over at Hilton Green, near Berriford, a good ten miles from here, at seven-fifty last night. One of the farm hands found him and thought he was dead at first. They got a doctor to him and sent him straight off to Wilborough hospital. They couldn't find out who he was

for a long time, but he came round this morning and mumbled something about Wilford and Wilborough police got through to me to know if I could help. From their description I guessed it was Jimmy and I got my motor bike and went over and identified him."

"And he's very bad, you say?"

"They reckon he'd been lying there since the night before. The Berriford police have picked up a bit about him. He was hanging about the market on Wednesday, but behaving funny. Some thought he was drunk. But the Super at Wilborough says the doctor reckons it was all the result of that crack he got and he must have been as tough as the devil to have carried on so long. Now the point, sir, is I've got to find the chap that hit him. Would you give me everything you can remember? Couldn't describe the chap that ran out, could you, sir?"

Merrow racked his memory to recall every detail of that night, but he could add little to what he had already told the constable.

"The fellow ran off into the woods because he disturbed the pheasants," he said, when Hawes had finished his notes. "And then there's the hat incident. That struck me as being damned curious, though you didn't seem to think much of it."

Hawes smiled knowingly.

"Perhaps I thought more of it than I said, sir," he responded. "But there was nothing to be done at the time. But I've got a full note of it." He flipped back the pages of his notebook.

Merrow went on, "You say your people think there was something behind it. Well, I was sure of it all along. I mean, Bailey's pigheadedness in keeping on saying he hit his head against a tree. He knew I didn't believe him. I got the impression that he knew exactly who hit him but he wasn't going to say. And more, I believe he was scared stiff of the man—really frightened. In fact I'd go so far as to say I think he thought the man meant to do him in."

Hawes listened with grave attention.

"Of course there's nothing to support that, but your opinion's interesting," he said. "The only thing against it is that I don't see any motive. Nobody really hated Jimmy—not to want to do him in. He was a damned little nuisance sometimes, I'll grant you, but they all knew him round here. That's what I told the Super when he asked me if Jimmy had any enemies."

Merrow was silent for some time. While Hawes was talking there had come to his mind a curious thought. The more he considered it, the more possible, even probable, it seemed, and like a fool he had never even recognised it before. The something curious about Bailey's behaviour, the something that was behind it all. Suddenly he rose.

"Excuse me a minute, Hawes," he said, "I've just remembered something I've got to tell Paternoster. I won't be long."

Merrow went along the corridor to Salter's room. Salter was there going through the notes he had taken of Gwen's story.

"Has your policeman gone?" he asked as Merrow came in.

Merrow said, "No. But Salter—er—Pollock—there's a big development, at least I think so. I wanted to tell you before I told Hawes." Quickly he retailed what the constable had said, then, "He spoke of motive and it came to me. I suppose because of what Gwen—Miss Darcy—told us. You remember what I said about Bailey in the taproom, when they were baiting him."

"Yes."

"About who set the snares that night Miss Warren was killed and Bailey shouting out about how he knew something more that happened then and that some people would be very sorry if he were to tell. You remember I told you I wanted to find out what he meant by that."

"Yes."

"Well, I've just remembered. Cummings, Baldock's man, was with me at the time. He heard Bailey's threat. Now then, supposing Bailey did see something. Supposing he was the unknown man in the woods that night. And supposing Cummings reported to Baldock. Isn't there motive there to try to shut Bailey's mouth for good—if Baldock is Logan?"

"There is," Salter said.

"Then what am I to do about it? I must give Hawes the whole story and then what's going to happen?"

"He wouldn't believe you to begin with, and then he'd probably go and ask Baldock if it were true," Salter said with a sour smile. "You're not going to tell him the whole story, Mr. Merrow. Go back and keep him talking for ten minutes. Tell him what Bailey said by all means. Every one in the tap heard it. But not a word about Baldock. I must do some telephoning—we've got to move quickly now. I'll come up to your room as soon as I've finished."

2

Merrow returned to Hawes with vague apologies.

"Now you were talking about motive," he said. "It's just occurred to me——" He recounted Bailey's threat at length. "Of course there mayn't be anything in it," he finished. "But I felt you ought to know."

He expected the constable, politely, to disregard the story, but Hawes did not.

"Jimmy said that, did he," he commented. "That accounts for it. I wonder what the little chap's got on his mind. Of course he's given to that sort of thing. But why I say this is the Super did mention to me that he had been talking rather wild. Of course he was raving and you can't take much notice of that; it isn't evidence. But it often shows they've got something worrying them."

"What's he been saying?" Merrow asked.

"Well, I hadn't been going to mention it because it might upset you, not that there's any reason for it. But Jimmy seems to have got you mixed up with the chap that hit him."

"Me?"

"I'm only saying what the Super told me, a regular old muddle about falling in the river and creeping up behind him, and all because you wanted him to tell something and he wouldn't. But he could if he wanted to—'the new gov'nor at Wilford Black Boy' he called you. I can tell you, sir," Hawes laughed apologetically, "the Super had you taped for a lot of trouble till I explained who you were and about how you tried to get Jimmy to say who hit him. But there it is, Jimmy's got something on his mind."

"Yes, he has," Merrow was thinking very hard and spoke for the sake of saying something. "Just as well I met you that night, Hawes."

"Well, it did save a bit of bother, sir."

"Did he say anything rational about the river?"

"If you ask me, sir, none of it was rational——" He broke off as the door opened.

Salter came in and Hawes rose to his feet, looking at him in surprise.

Merrow began in a hesitating way, "Oh, Hawes, this is Mr.—er——"

"Salter," the detective finished for him. "I've just been talking to your Superintendent—Mr. Farling—constable. He told me to introduce myself to you." Salter produced a card. "I think we may be able to help one another over this case of Bailey's. I'm working on a case that links up with him, I think. The Superintendent would like you to give him a ring at once, then I've said I'll run you and Mr. Merrow over to Wilborough. Bailey's a bit better and is conscious. They think if he saw Mr. Merrow he would talk."

Merrow drove. Salter sat in the back discussing every detail of the attack on Jimmy Bailey with Hawes. Merrow heard, with

amazement, the constable talking about the hat that had been left in Bailey's cottage.

"I'd been making some quiet enquiries about that," he told Salter, "and I was pretty sure it came from Mr. Baldock's. One he sent to the church jumble sale last May, I reckon. Matter of fact I was going along to ask him about it after I'd finished with Mr. Merrow. If it was I might have been able to trace who bought it. Mr. Quinton, the vicar's lady, would like as not remember."

"Very good idea," Salter answered calmly. "But you can check that later."

Some explanation had to be made to Stephen, and at Salter's suggestion Hawes had made it, telling him the truth, so far as he knew it, and bidding him keep his mouth shut and check all gossip. Gwen was left behind in a state of fierce indignation. Just when things were going to happen she was completely ignored, she protested.

Merrow said, "For God's sake, Gwen, be reasonable. This isn't a game."

"As if I didn't know that," she retorted bitterly.

Salter pacified her a little. He took her aside, and, remembering Argent's advice, asked her in a most convincing manner to watch the inn.

"I'm afraid some of this is bound to leak out," he said, "and we'll have Cummings over here to see what he can pick up. I'd like to know how long he stays and who he talks to. But be careful, very careful. Remember he'll probably be watching you."

At Wilborough Police Station it was Merrow who was ignored. He was left for a time to talk to an obviously curious station sergeant while Salter was closeted with Superintendent Farling and Hawes.

Hawes came from that conference first. He told Merrow he was going to the hospital with instructions. But he was impressed.

"My word, sir," he said solemnly, "I'd no idea all this was going on. And you and the young lady in it too. It's going to be the biggest case since I've been in the force."

Salter and the Superintendent came at last and together they piled into a police car and drove to the hospital. There was a pleasant-spoken man with them, looking like a youngish well-to-do sporting farmer, who was introduced as Inspector Mace. He sat next Farling, who drove.

Salter and Merrow spoke little during the drive. Salter appeared to be depressed. As they turned into the hospital grounds he said,

"I've given them all I've got and taken my chance. My hand's been forced. I daren't wait any longer. But I hope to heaven this man Bailey will cough up something to justify it, for the lord knows though I've got plenty of facts I've damned little evidence. Still we may get 'em."

Merrow shrugged his shoulders. He did not know what to say. Events had moved so tempestuously in the past couple of hours that they seemed hardly real.

There was a short delay at the hospital until the house surgeon came to tell them that Bailey could be seen. His bed had been wheeled into a private room and it had been arranged that Merrow should go, apparently, alone to see him, though Inspector Mace, garbed in a doctor's white overall, so that Bailey might believe him to be one of the staff, was to accompany him. Mace's job was to take a note of everything Jimmy might say. Merrow was amazed when a nurse took them into the room. Bailey in his white bed, clean and shaved, was a very different looking man from the stubbly-bearded, dirty fellow he had last seen. Jimmy's eyes were closed, but he opened them and stared wonderingly when Merrow said quietly:

"Hallo, Bailey. I'm glad to hear you're getting better."

4

The man made no reply for some moments, then he murmured, "Yes, I know you—the new guv'nor at the Black Boy, aren't you?"

Merrow nodded.

"Yes. You remember I found you in your cottage after some fellow had been for you."

Bailey said, again after a pause, "I've copped it all right. I'm going to die."

"Of course you're not," Merrow leaned forward and tried to smile convincingly. "You'll be well soon."

"I'm going to die," Bailey repeated in the same stubborn way in which he had insisted that he had hit his head against a tree. "I want to tell you something."

"Yes, Bailey." Merrow's voice was low and eager.

"You look after yourself, sir, or he'll have you the same as he got me."

"Who?"

Merrow was conscious of Mace at a table by the window and the nurse by his side, listening as avidly for the answer as he was.

"That—that blasted——" Bailey ripped out a torrent of obscenity that sounded the more offensive because of the weak-

ness of his voice. He cursed the unnamed man in a horrible way.

"But who is he?" Merrow demanded when his fury died down.

"Ernie Cummings, the bastard." His voice died away, and the nurse came hurrying towards him. But Bailey recovered after a few moments. "Ernie Cummings, that's the chap," he added.

"But why?" Merrow asked.

"'Cos he thinks I've told you something. About him and his guv'nor. What I see that night."

"What did you see that night, Bailey?" Merrow asked slowly.

"What I see I see," the man said with maddening inconsequence. "And I don't talk about what I see. 'Tweren't no affair of mine."

"But, Bailey, why did you tell Cummings that you'd told me?"

"'Cos of what he done to me. Got a hold of my arm and nigh wrenched it off, the dirty coward, trying to make me say what I see. It hurt so as I screeched out, but I wouldn't tell 'un. All I say is you wait, you and old Baldock. I'll tell the new guv'nor up at the Black Boy I say, 'cos the lady came from his house. And I'll tell the whole parish what I see, I say, then you won't have to ask me. You wait, I say. That made 'un fair wild and he let me go, and he say he'll shut my mouth and he'll shut yours too. Then he hit me: come behind me he did and never give me a chance." Bailey broke off into muttered profanities.

Merrow tried once more to get the little man to tell what he had seen. There was no doubt whatever now that it concerned Janet Warren and Bailey's part-told story had sinister implications. But the man had grown mulish again.

"I ain't going to say nawthin'," he said sullenly. "I don't know nawthin'. All I says is you look out, guv'nor, or he'll have you too."

He closed his eyes and seemed to lose consciousness. Merrow was frantic. The stubborn little brute held the solution to what had suddenly become a problem of the utmost importance, and it looked as if he might die with his tale untold. Merrow looked to Mace, seeking some advice from him. The inspector was whispering to the nurse. A moment later she came quietly over to the bed.

She placed a hand gently on Bailey's forehead and smoothed the bedclothes, motioning Merrow to move away. Then she spoke softly to the ill man; but firmly, as though to a refractory child.

"Now, Bailey," she said, "your visitor will have to be going

in a minute. It was very kind of him to come and see you. Now what is all this nonsense you've been talking about? Things you saw that night—I don't suppose you saw anything. You're just making it up."

Bailey opened his eyes and glared.

"That's a lie," he said. "I did, I see Ernie Cummings and old Baldock and the lady. But they didn't know I see 'em; they didn't see me, nor didn't Harry Ling, and he was looking for me. Up a tree I was where Harry Ling 'ud never think to look. And there I stay till I reckon he'd give up and gone along to the Black Boy courting. And I can show 'ee the tree to prove it."

The nurse smiled patiently.

"I'm sure you could, Bailey; and then what happened?" she asked.

"I was just climbing down when I hear someone talking over in Baldock's field the other side of the river. So I stay where I were. It were a lady talking. She say, 'This isn't the way I come,' and old Baldock he say it's a short cut, which is a lie. They was on the path by the high bank and I see 'em easy 'cos the moon was getting up. Then quick as knife I see old Baldock snatch her bag. She started to holler, and Ernie Cummings, he get up out of them whin bushes and clap his hand over her mouth and Baldock open the bag and take something out. Then he throw the bag in the river—and——"

Bailey stopped with an incoherent mumble.

"Go on, Bailey," the nurse said in a tense voice.

"I never see no more. I never see nawthin'," the man answered obstinately. "'Tweren't no affair of mine. I weren't going to get mixed up in that. I takes myself off quick. 'Tweren't my business. I don't know nawthin' more."

The nurse was pale and agitated. She spoke sharply,

"Tell me at once, Bailey, what happened," she said. "If you don't I'll—I'll get the police to you."

The man whined.

"'Tweren't to do with me, miss. I swear to God it weren't."

"Then tell me the truth. If it wasn't your business you've nothing to be afraid of."

Bailey answered slowly and with obvious reluctance.

"The lady—fell—in, miss. Baldock shove her," he almost whispered.

Merrow exclaimed "My God!"

The nurse silenced him.

"Ssh, be quiet," she said. "You say Mr. Baldock pushed her in, Bailey?" she went on.

But Bailey only murmured uneasily and seemed to fall asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I

HUGH MERROW came back to the Black Boy alone that evening.

Salter had gone on from Wilborough to Wodenbridge. Inspector Mace and Hawes had driven Merrow in a police car and were waiting in Priory Lane at the side of the inn. Merrow's job was to see if Cummings were in the house.

The Black Boy was very peaceful and homely. Lights shone from the windows into the warm night. The front door was open, giving an attractive vista of the pleasant old-fashioned hall. As Merrow entered a soothing murmur of conversation reached his ears.

Stephen stood half in half out of the smoke room, a tray in his hand, chatting in a friendly way with the customers within. From farther down the passage the subdued noise of chatter from the tap-room came faintly. In the oak-beamed parlour, its door open like the rest, two middle-aged women sat over coffee, knitting.

Eve came out of the dining room, where she had been clearing the tables. She went towards the kitchen. The big grandfather clock lazily struck nine.

Hugh went into the office bar. Stephen joined him there a minute later, four empty glasses on the tray.

"Back again, sir," he said cheerily. "I was wondering when you'd be along. Evie's kept some dinner for you." Stephen proceeded mechanically to refill the empty glasses. "Anything happened, sir?" he added.

Merrow said in a low voice, "Is Cummings in the smoke room, Stephen?"

"No, sir, he's been and gone," old Paternoster replied, measuring a double gin. "Come in just before seven, early for him. Tom served him. Evie was busy."

"Stay long?"

"About ten minutes, I suppose. I hear him tell Tom he'd have to hurry back or his guv'nor 'ud be after him. Come up to the post he had and stopped for one on his way."

"All right, Stephen. Back in a minute."

Merrow hurried out to report to the police car, leaving Stephen looking after him with some anxiety in his steady eyes.

He returned in a couple of minutes. Stephen was on his way back from the smoke room.

"Is Miss Darcy up or downstairs, do you know?" he asked.

"Weren't she with you, sir?" Paternoster said with surprise.

"No. Why?"

"I thought she'd gone to meet you, sir. Got her car out and went away in a hurry round about seven o'clock time. She told Evie she might be a bit late for dinner. I quite thought she'd come back with you."

"Went out about seven, you say? And it's after nine now."

"Nothing wrong, I hope, sir," Stephen asked meaningly.

"She'll be along presently," Merrow said with an assurance he did not feel. "I'll go and get a snack of food. Tell her I'm in the dining room if she comes in, will you, Stephen."

But Merrow had little appetite for his food. Gwen's absence was disturbing. From Stephen's times it was obvious that she had left just after Cummings had gone, and that looked as if she were following him. While he played with the meal that Evie had brought him, Bailey's faintly spoken words: "The lady fell in. Baldock shove her" were running maddeningly in his brain. It was all that fellow Salter's doing—telling Gwen to watch Cummings. Why the devil had he wanted to butt in?

Merrow's head swung round sharply at the sound of the door opening. Eve was bringing in Inspector Mace.

"I've come up here to do a bit of telephoning," Mace explained in a matter-of-fact way. "I'm afraid, very much afraid he's slipped us."

"Not gone already?"

"Looks like it. House all in darkness; no answer to our knocks. Hawes has gone along to see the woman who works there, Mrs. Amos, I think he said. Lives in a cottage up the hill over the river, doesn't she?"

"I don't know, Inspector. I'm afraid I don't know anything about the man's household."

"Came in as a daily, according to Hawes. Otherwise he had only Cummings to look after him. Funny arrangement, very funny."

"You haven't left the house unwatched?"

"Oh, no, sir. Two plain-clothes men came over ahead of us. Got there half an hour ago, and he seems to have gone then. But we'll pick him up. Hawes knew his car number. I'll get along to the phone now, sir, if I may."

"Do. And come into the bar in the hall when you have finished," Merrow said.

He wanted no more food, and the time had come to explain to Stephen what was happening. Stephen would have to use his tact to keep the inn from talking. Already it was probably known in the smoke room and the tap that something unusual was happening.

Old Paternoster listened with his usual imperturbability.

Merrow said nothing about Baldock; it was Cummings the police were seeking, he said.

Paternoster shook his grizzled head.

"I had reckoned things were a little warmer than you said," he commented. "But I'd never have thought it of Ernie Cummings—not that I ever liked the man; shifty, sir, shifty. Not straight. I had a word with Tom just now and I'm afraid he give it away, sir. I hope you won't blame him; he didn't know he was doing wrong."

"What happened, Stephen?"

"Tom got talking, as he might with any regular customer, and happens to mention that Mr. Hawes had been here to see you—just casual like. And Cummings seems to have got it out of Tom that you and him and Mr. Pollock went off together in a hurry. Tom says there was nothing more than that: just a chat. I haven't said anything to him about it, but I'm sure he'll take on when he hears he's done wrong. He's a good man and he'd never have done it if he'd known, but—but—there's never been anything to hide in the Black Boy before that poor lady came. And now there's this trouble about Jimmy Bailey." Stephen sighed.

Merrow saw Mace in the hall and went to bring him into the bar. He would want to see the potman undoubtedly. He introduced him to Stephen, but the telephone bell began to ring and Merrow said, "I'll answer that, Stephen. Just tell Mr. Mace what you've been telling me about Tom Self, will you?" Merrow hurried out.

He picked up the instrument.

Gwen Darcy's voice came from the other end of the wire. She was excited and agitated.

"That you, Hugh?" she said. "Thank goodness I've got you at last, you've been engaged for simply hours. Hugh, listen. I'm speaking from the call box at a place called Thorney. Baldock and Cummings are sitting in a car drawn up on some heathland about a mile and a half away. Or they were about half an hour ago. I had to take a chance to let you know, and I'm sure they haven't come back because they'd have to pass here if they did. They're just sitting, waiting for something. They've been there nearly an hour."

"Thorney, you say?"

"Yes. I don't know where it is, Hugh, but I think it's about fifteen miles away. I followed Cummings. He came into the Black Boy this evening and I thought he looked nervous and excited. And I had a hunch that they were going to bolt. I got my car out and watched from the other side of the bridge. I was hidden by the trees, they couldn't see me. And they did, soon

after half-past seven. They've got luggage with them. What am I to do, Hugh? Can't you do anything—telephone the police or something? We mustn't let that brute get away." Her voice was insistent.

Merrow said, "Hang on a second," and dashed for Mace.

The inspector was at the telephone within a minute. Merrow outside the box heard him questioning Gwen searchingly.

"I know the place," he said at length. "Now you'd better do this." He gave her swift instructions. "We'll be with you very soon. You've done some good work to-night, Miss Darcy. Hang on and do what I told you. Good-bye." He slammed the receiver back on its cradle, lifted it again, and called a police number.

"I'll want you with me, sir," he said to Merrow as he flung out of the telephone box a minute later. "Can you be ready in a couple of minutes? I must cut down to Baldock's house before we go."

He grabbed his hat from the office and made for the door.

2

Merrow was waiting at the corner of the Priory Lane when the police car came back. Mace had one of his plain-clothes men with him, a sturdy taciturn fellow named Windham. The other, he said, he had left to explain matters to Hawes, who had not returned from his visit to Mrs. Amos.

"Where is this place Thorney?" Merrow asked as they set off.

"Near the mouth of the Woden. As quiet a spot as you'd find within fifty miles," Mace said. "Nothing there but the church, the post office and about half a dozen cottages."

"What the devil do you reckon they've gone there for? They couldn't be going to—by gad—I believe—— Do you think they're going to join up with Charlton in his yacht?"

"That's exactly what I do think, Mr. Merrow, and what's worrying me is shall we get there in time. How are the tides to-day, Windham?"

"High there about two," Windham said tersely. "Plenty of water for their job now."

"There would be," Mace said with a sour laugh. "The crook gets all the luck. Hope Mann connects with Miss Darcy quick."

"Mann?" Merrow queried.

"Constable who covers that beat. Of course he was out when I phoned, but his wife thought she could get hold of him. I sent orders for him to go and find Miss Darcy at the corner of

Ferry Lane. That's the lane they've gone down. Lucky thing I know that country. I was born at Thorney. I've told her what to tell him."

They were driving fast through the still warm night and soon the lights of Wilborough began to show. Mace made a brief stop at the police station there and collected a second man, a uniformed constable, Cook by name. A mile or so beyond Wilborough they turned from the main road and met the first patch of fog. Mace swore irritably as he checked the car's speed, but Windham said :

"It works both ways, sir : if it holds us up it'll hold the boat up more. Do you know if she's got power, sir ?" he added, to Merrow.

"I'm afraid I don't. Most of these yachts have an auxiliary engine, but I can't be sure."

"Let's hope she hasn't," Windham said.

Mace spoke of Salter. He had hoped to have had some word of him at the station, but there had been none since Wodenbridge police had reported his arrival there and that one of their men had gone with him to the river.

The fog was patchy. It grew worse when they reached Thorney Walks, a stretch of open heath country. A tang of the sea flooded the car when Mace got out for a moment to inspect a shadowy signpost that showed like a dim gibbet in the headlights. He pushed on as hard as he could go. Happily they met nothing. Presently Merrow saw that they were passing houses, and a couple of minutes later two blobs of light ahead proclaimed another car. Mace slowed and stopped.

Out of the fog a ghostly figure approached. Mace flung open the door and Merrow heard Gwen's voice. He was out of the car in an instant.

Gwen said excitedly, "They were still there ten minutes ago. I took the policeman Mr. Mace sent down. He's waiting there. You could hardly see the car from the road, but they're in it. I crept up quite close and could hear voices.

Mace said, "Right. We'll get along. You stay here by the cars, Cook, and run ours across the road to block it."

3

They went cautiously down the rough, grass-grown track that Mace had called Ferry Lane.

It ran unfenced across the open heath with occasional clumps of gorse looming mysteriously by its side. A few hundred yards along a torch flashed for a second on the ground ahead.

Gwen said, "That's the policeman. I'll go and tell him you're

here." She went stealthily forward with Mace a yard or two behind.

Merrow heard a whispered conversation, then Gwen returned.

"You're to come on quietly," she said.

Mace was alone when they reached him. He had sent Mann on to the old ferry hard, the landing place at the end of the lane. The four of them, Gwen and Merrow, Windham and Mace stood in the shelter of thick gorse bushes while Mace talked softly.

His idea was to take Baldock and Cummings at once. The fog would be pretty sure to delay Charlton's boat if that were for what they were waiting, and he hoped to surprise the two men in the car without any trouble. He finished his instructions and they moved off, Gwen leading, four dim figures creeping noiselessly through the mist on the short turf that fringed the roadway. In a couple of minutes Gwen stopped. When they drew up with her she pointed to the left.

"Can you see it?" she whispered.

Merrow could just discern a dark smudge not far ahead.

Mace said very softly, "All right. Give us two or three minutes then carry on."

He and Windham dropped to their knees and melted into the mist-veiled landscape to take up position, one by each door of the car.

Merrow spoke very quietly to Gwen.

"You're simply marvellous," he said. "You don't know what you've done——"

"I do," she said in a low but fierce voice. "I've done what all of you said couldn't be done. Or I hope I have. I've got the police to arrest this—this blood-sucking beast who as good as murdered Janet. At least Mr. Mace doesn't want me to run away so that I won't get hurt. Oh, Hugh, Baldock can't wriggle out of it now—can he?"

It was no time then to tell Gwen of Bailey's terrible story. All Merrow said was:

"No. I'm sure he can't now. We've got some new evidence: you'll hear about it presently. But he can't wriggle out of that. Gwen I've got to get on my job in a second. If there is any trouble, do take care of yourself—please. I mean, there may be. Baldock will be desperate when he finds he's trapped. I—What's that?" His voice sank to a whisper.

Faintly from the river the regular chug of a boat's engine came to their ears.

"I must get off," he said, and touched her hand for a moment. "Be careful, Gwen, dear. Don't spoil everything now."

"It's all right, Hugh. Good luck," she answered in a strained tired voice, and a second later she was alone.

The steady pulse of the boat's motor grew more distinct as Merrow made his way through heather and bracken. He was working so that he might approach Baldock's car as if from the old ferry hardway. The going was difficult and he dared not hurry for fear of being heard. And the unexpected coming of the boat complicated matters.

If it were Charlton's boat then the men in the car would have heard it and might at any moment start for the hard to join it. That would upset Mace's careful plan. Once Baldock and Cummings were out of the car escape in this fog would be easy. Mace had stressed that point. Merrow decided to act quickly. He made for the road and turned back and came openly along it, shining a torch Mace had lent him without attempt at concealment.

He came abreast of the car, stopped for a moment, switched off his light and went towards it. He saw a door of the car open and Baldock called softly: "Hallo, there. Can you tell me where we are. I've lost the road. I want to get to Wilborough."

Mace answered.

Merrow heard him say sternly: "Edgar Baldock and Ernest Cummings, I am a police officer——"

"What?" Baldock interrupted sharply. "Baldock? You've made a mistake, officer——"

Then Windham's voice broke in.

"Look out, sir," he yelled, and Merrow heard the whine of the self-starter.

He was almost up to the car then. He saw Mace make a jump for the open door. Baldock hurled him away and slammed it. He saw the other door open and Windham start to spring in. Then there was a sharp crack and a flash of flame. Someone had fired. Windham fell back with a cry of pain.

The second door slammed to. The car began to move. It swung crazily round and went lurching towards the roadway with ever increasing speed, its headlights now full on. Instinctively Merrow made a wild jump for the running board, missed his footing and was dragged some yards over the rough ground.

As he scrambled to his feet he saw the car turn towards the village. Then for a few ghastly moments its lights fell upon Gwen, standing in the road.

The car went straight for her. She had no chance. He heard her scream. The headlights flashed out and he stumbled towards her in the darkness, forgetful of Mace or Windham, forgetful of everything but an overpowering desire to get to her at once.

He found her a limp inert mass by the roadside with blood already staining her face and sleeve. And as he knelt over her, his torch shining on her pale face, fearfully calling her name, from far up the lane came the scream of brakes, a voice yelling frantically, a crash—then an eerie silence.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I

SOMEONE came tearing noisily up from the ferry hard. Merrow looked up and saw a torch's light swaying erratically. He caught a momentary glimpse of police uniform.

A moment later Constable Mann was asking, "What's happened here? I heard shooting—Oh, my God! the young lady." He was on his knees beside her instantly.

Merrow said wildly, "For God's sake get on and telephone for a doctor. Windham's been shot, there's been a car crash up the road—are you a First Aid man? If so do what you can for this lady first."

But Mann was already at work. He was examining Gwen skilfully.

"She's alive. Keep her warm. Don't move her," he said at length.

Merrow had his coat off while he was speaking.

Mace had come unnoticed to their side.

"My God! Miss Darcy—is it bad?" he said.

"Not too good, sir, I'm afraid," Mann answered.

Mace said, "Those swine got Windham too. Shot him: through the chest. I've patched him up as best I can. We must get the ambulance. Sorry, Mr. Merrow, we must get on. We'll do all we can."

The two men moved off at a run.

Merrow tucked his coat gently about Gwen and, kneeling by her side, took her hand in his. The pulse was beating, but faintly.

Her head was badly cut, her coat torn at the shoulder where the car had hit her. She was bleeding, though not badly, yet he could do nothing to help her.

For what seemed to Hugh Merrow an eternity he knelt by her side speaking to her from time to time in the foolish hope that she might answer, striving to staunch the blood that trickled from a cut on her forehead with his handkerchief, cursing Mace and Mann for not having got help already and hardly giving a thought to Edgar Baldock and his confederate.

Up at the corner, where the Ferry Lane left the winding country road, Mace and the second constable, Cook, were working on a heap of wreckage.

The police car was smashed to bits. Baldock's car lay on its side in the ditch, its roof crumpled.

Cummings had gone through the windscreen when the smash occurred. He was mangled and dead. Baldock, by some miracle, appeared to be almost unhurt. He was jammed in his seat screaming in frenzied terror that the car would catch fire, and pleading with Mace, for God's sake to get him out quickly.

A couple of labourers had turned up from somewhere and presently a car came along and gave some welcome light to the workers striving to get the abject Baldock clear.

They succeeded at last. Baldock limped stiffly to the side of the road dazed and shaking. But as he began to recover his nerve, he became suddenly truculent, demanding to be taken to a doctor instantly.

Mace spoke to him sharply.

"You will stay where you are," he said. "A doctor will be here shortly and he'll deal with you in your turn. Then I'll deal with you."

"I don't know who you are and by what right to give me orders," Baldock said angrily.

"I've told you whom I am. I'm a police officer," Mace said.

"How do I know that?" Baldock blustered. "There were two men who said they were policemen out on the heath just now. They are responsible for this terrible tragedy and the death of my poor man, Cummings. It's outrageous. Two men attacked us, tried to force their way into our car. Naturally we thought they were holding us up. And my poor man, Cummings, quite rightly tried to escape."

"Your poor man Cummings deliberately shot a man," Mace said coldly. "That man may be dead by now." Baldock winced. "He deliberately ran over a woman in the road. She may be dead too——"

Baldock burst out, "It was nothing to do with me. I never fired. I wasn't driving. If what you say is true it was sheer accident and your fault. You've no right to detain me—I am injured. I must drag myself as best I can to find a doctor."

Mace placed a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Edgar Baldock," he said deliberately. "You know who I am. You will stay here and presently you will come to the police station with me to answer certain questions concerning the death of Janet Warren——"

"What—that mad woman who killed—who was killed in my grounds? I know nothing about her, I gave my evidence

at the inquest and I know nothing more. I think you must be mad, whoever you are."

"I have reason to believe that you know a great deal more," Mace said in a voice like doom. "Cook." The plain-clothes constable came towards him. "Take this man and look after him till I'm ready."

Cook took a firm hold of Baldock's arm.

"Don't try any funny business," he said.

Baldock merely gasped. All his bluster had left him and he seemed to be shivering.

A doctor arrived a few minutes later. Mace boarded his car and they made their way through the wreckage and down the Ferry Lane.

They found Merrow still by Gwen's side. He said in a dull voice, "Salter was here just now. He's gone over to look after Windham. He's landed at the hardway. He said something about Charlton's boat being aground, and Charlton telling him he was going to pick up Baldock here. I'm afraid I didn't listen very carefully."

"All right. I'll go to him," Mace said. "I'll come back for you presently, doctor."

The doctor in the light of Merrow's torch was examining Gwen.

"Can't say much till we get her to the hospital," he said after a while. "Concussion, certainly, but what other damage impossible to tell. All I can say is this, it might be worse."

"Thank God," Merrow murmured. "There's nothing I can do?"

"No, leave her just where she is. The ambulance should be here at any moment now. I'll go and find the other victim."

Merrow went a few yards with him to put him on his way. They could see torches showing faintly through the mist and in response to a hail from the doctor Mace came out to meet him. Merrow heard him report that Windham seemed pretty bad.

Then a blaze of headlights quickly approaching told of the ambulance at last.

2

Merrow walked back to the scene of the smash with Mace and Salter, neither of whom paid much attention to him.

Once the ambulance had gone both detectives seemed to put Windham and Gwen Darcy from their minds. They were talking of Charlton.

The *Pegasus*, Merrow gathered, had gone from her moorings off Wodenbridge Quay when Salter reached it. He had a ser-

came from the local station with him and they sought out Sam Parsons.

Parsons told them that the *Peggie* had gone about half-past seven. Mr. Charlton had been ashore as usual and had left the Hoy in a hurry, and the next thing he knew the yacht had dropped her moorings and was going down river. He had thought it funny because it looked a bit like fog coming up even then, but Mr. Charlton did funny things sometimes, and after all it was his business if he ran on the mud.

The police sergeant went into the Hoy and confirmed what Salter had suspected—Charlton had had a telephone call there immediately before he left. He had explained to George Beal, the landlord, that an old friend had rung him up from the inn at Ewegate asking him to go down and meet him there. Ewegate, Merrow learned, was opposite Thorney, the place to which the ferry used to run.

Salter and the sergeant had engaged Sam Parsons to take them in search of *Pegasus* in a motor boat, and they had found the yacht a few miles down the river, fogbound and jammed hard on the mud.

They had boarded her as the tide rose, and Salter said, "You're not going to have much trouble there. He started chucking his weight about till he heard that you were after Baldock for murder, then he panicked. Trying to clear himself. The woman too. Lost their heads completely. I left the sergeant taking their statements and told Parsons to put me ashore at Ewegate so that I could phone your people. He's gone back to take the yacht back to Wodenbridge as soon as the fog goes. But I heard the shot and the shouting and made him land me this side instead. I guessed it might be trouble. Those statements are going to make interesting reading."

They had reached the corner where quite a small crowd had by then collected. They had just got Cummings' body clear of the wreckage and in the lights of Gwen's car the doctor was examining a sullen Baldock.

Merrow stood aside. He felt despondent and utterly detached from the whole dramatic scene. He hated it; he wanted to get away and leave it to the policeman to clear up. He wanted to get to a telephone and ring the hospital, though he knew Gwen could not yet have arrived. It was damnable. What a nightmare sequel to his dream! The old Black Boy, simple, serene, remote, untouchable as he had thought by passing years of human trouble had led him to this—violence, murder, crime, woman destruction. And if Gwen died—he would never want to see the Black Boy again.

Salter joined him after a while.

"Nothing to keep us here any longer, Mr. Merrow," he said. "I've identified Logan; he's Baldock all right. The police have got all they want for the moment. You'll be driving Miss Darcy's car back, I suppose: what about slipping off at once?"

"I'd be glad to," Merrow said dejectedly. "Mace doesn't want me any more, I suppose."

"Mace doesn't want anything except to get Baldock safely inside," Salter said. "The police all over: you do their work for them and if they think of it they thank you very much and they'll let you know if they want you again." He gave a hard laugh. "I'll wager he's on the telephone to me before the night's over—when he's begun to think of a few of the things he hasn't thought of yet. Anyhow I've told him we're going."

"Then let's get off. I'm sick of it."

"Mind if I drive?" Salter said.

"I don't care."

"I want to make a call on the way."

"A call?"

"Yes. Mace may think he's finished his job but I'm damned sure I haven't finished mine. Hope it's not going to bore you, Mr. Merrow, but I want to go to Shinglemouth."

"Shinglemouth?"

"Yes. Leone. Everyone seems to have forgotten Leone."

"Oh, all right, if you want to."

"Very kind of you, Mr. Merrow. I feel I rather owe it to Miss Darcy to wind up that side of the case."

Salter knew well enough the reason for Merrow's despondency, and as they drove, cleverly he set himself to revive his spirits. He spoke of Gwen and reported that the doctor had told Mace that he was hopeful that she had escaped any very grave injury.

"You can give the hospital a ring from the hotel," he said. "They ought to be able to tell you something then."

Merrow began to cheer up.

A breeze was sweeping the mist away and as they ran into Whindleford village Salter recalled his long vigil of the night before.

"Things have moved quicker than I thought then," he said. "I wonder how Leone will react. I'm going to bluff him and I'll want a witness. You'll come with me, I hope."

"Yes, if it will help," Merrow said, still without interest.

They ran down the hill into the lonely marsh. A heron got up from one of the dykes with a hoarse scream that startled Salter. Ahead, lights still showed in the Beach Hotel.

Salter swung the car into the grounds and stopped by the

main entrance. Despite the late hour there were a few guests at the little tables on the terrace, but the hall was deserted and in semi-darkness.

A weary-looking waiter appeared from somewhere as they entered. He looked questioninglly at them.

Salter said peremptorily, "I want to see Mr. Leone at once," and took a card from his cigarette case. "Take this and see that he gets it immediately."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I

THEY had not long to wait. Leone himself emerged from the lift within a couple of minutes. He was suave and courteous but even Merrow could read the anxiety and suspicion that lurked in his melancholy dark eyes.

"You would please to come this way, gentlemen," he said with a slight bow. "It is fortunate that I had not yet retired or I must have kept you waiting longer."

He operated the lift himself and brought them to a comfortable sitting room on the second floor.

"And now, gentleman," he said as he closed the door, "what is this urgent business? I trust that it does not concern any of the guests. If so——" He shrugged his shoulders with an air of resignation. "If so, you will, I am sure, be diplomatic."

Salter said bluntly, "Mr. Leone, it concerns yourself."

Leone's face hardened. "Myself? I do not understand. How does it concern myself?"

"I come to bring you some information concerning certain—er—associates of yours, Mr. Leone." Leone was watching Salter alertly under frowning brows. "First, your associate Edgar Logan——"

"Logan? Logan? I do not know any Logan."

"Think, Mr. Leone. Are you sure you never knew an Edward Logan?"

"I am quite sure."

"Perhaps then he called himself Edgar Baldock."

Leone started, but he answered with complete self-possession, "Baldock? There is a Mr. Baldock who has been here to lunch once or twice. I do not know him except as a very occasional visitor. He has never stayed here. This Mr. Baldock, I understand, lives in the neighbourhood. Is that the gentleman you mean?"

"That's the man. Lives at Wilford. Surely, Mr. Leone,

you must have read of him when Miss Warren, a lady who often stayed here at this hotel, was drowned in his grounds some weeks ago. Think, Mr. Leone."

That shot went home. Leone lost much of his composure.

"Ah yes—yes, I do recall the name now," he said. "I had forgotten, I——"

"No, you hadn't," Salter interrupted. "You read every word of the case because you were afraid you would be dragged into it. You know Baldock perfectly well. You'll do yourself no good by lying. Listen to me, Mr. Leone: Edgar Baldock is under arrest at this moment." Salter stopped deliberately. "Can you guess what for?"

"I—no—no. I do not understand." Leone's fingers were twitching and he moved restlessly in his chair. "You tell me he is arrested?"

"Arrested—for—murder," Salter said grimly. "Murder, Mr. Leone. The murder of—the lady—who stayed so often—in this hotel—Miss Janet Warren."

"Murder!" Leone moaned out the word. "Oh, my God! But the inquest. It said it was an accident. No. No. I can tell you nothing about this terrible thing."

The man's nerve was going. He stared at Salter like a frightened animal. "I—I——" he went on, but Salter checked him.

"More of your friends are in trouble too. Frederick Charlton: you know him?"

"Charlton?" Leone hesitated. "There is a Mr. Frederick Charlton who stays here sometimes. That is the man you mean, yes?"

"You don't know anything about him then?"

"No. No more than one knows of any guest who comes here. He lives in London, but——"

Again Salter broke in.

"I mean the man whose car you went out in after dinner last night. You and Irene Marks. You went to Whindleford and just beyond the village you and the woman got into another car. Baldock's wasn't it? Charlton waited for you and drove you back late, then he and the woman returned to his boat at Wodenbridge. Think, Mr. Leone. Don't you know anything about this man?"

Leone's swarthy face looked almost green. He could not keep still. His eyes ranged the room as though he sought some way of escape. At last he murmured, "I—I know him."

"The police have got him too," Salter said. "And the woman Marks. And another of your friends," Salter went on with deadly persistence, "Nurse Marshall. The police have her too. They have all made statements, Mr. Leone. You can't

get out of it. Murder, Mr. Leone. The law punishes murder more severely than—blackmail.”

That broke the wretched man. He groaned. Then his words came in a torrent.

“I am innocent. I had nothing to do with it. I swear by all the saints. I knew nothing of it. That devil made me do many things, but murder—no. No. No—no-no-no. They cannot prove it—never. I tell her only to follow Charlton. I know no more. Why should I want her to die. She was my friend. I helped her. I risked much. When I heard she was dead my hope died too. I never even suspected. Murder! He killed her? He was a fiend.”

To both Merrow and Salter these wild passionate disjointed words brought utter amazement. The man must mean that Janet Warren was his friend. Salter said very sternly:

“Mr. Leone, if what you say is true I can advise you. I may even help you. Calm yourself. Calm yourself, I say. Now tell me your story, quietly. Start with Miss Warren. How did you help her?”

2

Salter's words had an effect. Leone made a great effort. He clenched his twitching hands.

“I was helping her to escape that—that fiend. Baldock!” He spat the last word out. “Baldock, the man who would ruin me as he would ruin her. As he has ruined hundreds, thousands of miserable people. Baldock! I will be happy the day he is hanged. I will tell you. I will tell you everything. Miss Warren. She had courage, that lady. And so clever. He never knew that she was after him. Charlton never knew. She had fooled him too. And that fiend murdered her. Poor, poor lady. God rest her soul.” He crossed himself.

He told his story hysterically, at times with savage hatred in his voice, repeating himself, insisting on his innocence, cursing Baldock with Latin frenzy, but out of it all came a tale far stranger than any Merrow had ever imagined.

Leone told of his earlier friendship with Nurse Marshall; his gratitude to her for her care of him when he had been at her nursing home, of how he had helped her. He had confided in her his dream of building a luxury hotel at Shinglemouth, and when financial troubles came upon her he had bought her house and some acres of land that went with it.

“I did not bargain over the price,” he said bitterly. “She was in trouble, that was enough. I paid her what she asked. How well she has rewarded me!”

That was the beginning of the unhappy story. Leone had risked the whole of his savings and raised every penny he could to build the Beach Hotel.

He had found some backers, formed a small company in which he was the dominating shareholder, and had opened some six years before. But things went slowly. It would take time to build up the reputation of so unusual an hotel. Leone was all but at the end of his resources when Nurse Marshall came to the place one day.

"She had changed. She was very different. She had married, she told me, a Mr. Charlton, a financier in London, and was rich. She offered to help me. Mr. Charlton would find someone to put more money into the firm. We went to Paris and there I met—Baldock." Again he spat the name out in hatred.

Baldock had put up the money but he had made stipulations. He had a "little friend," who was to be given the position of receptionist.

"I did not know who she was. I swear it," Leone insisted. "I thought her some discarded mistress of his. It was more than a year before I understood. I knew her only as Miss Carnon. I did not know she was his spy, Marks."

Leone's story followed, to Salter, a very familiar course. Once in Baldock's clutches pressure was applied slowly but inexorably. At first the threat of withdrawing his loan was sufficient, then as the hotel prospered grimmer threats were used. Leone in his single-minded passion for his beloved hotel had played straight into Baldock's crafty hands.

He had never enquired why Mr. Charlton was to stay there whenever he liked without payment. If he wondered, he never guessed at first that strange telephone messages that came to him personally, to be passed on personally to Baldock by phone, were other than business messages connected with some financial deal. Baldock, he said, like many financiers, liked to work in the background through agents.

Gulio Leone had a tragic disillusionment on the day that he dismissed Miss Carnon for tampering with letters addressed to a guest in the hotel. Leone was summoned to London to see Mr. Baldock within an hour. He returned in terror. Mr. Baldock had explained to him exactly how deeply involved he was in and the nature of certain affairs that had been going on at the Beach Hotel with his apparent approval.

Leone saw himself, if he spoke, ruined and in the dock charged with blackmail. He knew too that Miss Carnon had been placed at the Beach solely to spy for Baldock, to report on likely visitors.

"In an hotel many things occur which are of no concern of the management. So long as our guests behave themselves we

cannot ask personal questions. An hotel is not a convent." His shrugged shoulders conveyed much.

From that time onward Baldock had made no attempt to disguise his orders. Leone was told what to do and he did it. There was no doubt that the man was a coward with a streak of crook in him, but his dilemma was one that would have broken a much stronger character.

Baldock had him completely in his power and the wretched man could see no way, save ruin, of escape.

Then he told of his meeting with Janet Warren. He guessed why she came to the hotel from time to time. There were others who did the same and went for solitary walks along the lonely beach to meet Charlton so that he might talk without possibility of hidden witnesses to overhear.

It was about three months ago, when Janet had come on one of her periodical visits. Janet, he said, had asked to see him after dinner: some question of changing her room was the excuse she gave.

Leone told the story dramatically. He jumped to his feet and paced across the room.

"I stand here, where I stand now," he said. "Miss Warren sits in the chair where that gentleman sits." He indicated Merrow. "I say 'Madam is not satisfied with her room?' and when she replies I think that the ruin I have feared for so long has come to me. Miss Warren looks at me coldly. She says, 'Mr. Leone'—never shall I forget—'do you want to go to prison for blackmail?' I was confounded. I am afraid I spoke rudely to her but she took no notice. She repeats her question. I try to deny that I know what she means. She tells me things that make my heart stop beating." Leone shuddered.

"She knows of Marshall, how she is living with Charlton. She knows that I was a patient at Marshall's nursing home. She says, 'I am not sure yet if you are a rogue or just a fool. Which are you?' Never has such a thing been said to me before. I am angry, furious. Then I am frightened."

Leone returned to his chair and went on more soberly. Janet had offered him a chance in return for his help. She knew that Charlton was merely an agent and she was determined to discover who his master was. The Italian became excited again as he spoke of Janet's determination to go on with her task whatever the result might be.

"She had no fear, that lady," he said with an emphatic gesture. "She told me, sitting there in that chair, that I was a coward. It was true." Leone spoke with immense melancholy. "I tried to excuse myself. My life, my career, all would be ruined if I fight against Baldock. And she laughed—it was

a terrible laugh, menacing but so brave. And she told me she too had a career and a life and they would be ruined if she did not fight him. 'I want to be happy and I am going to be happy' she said, 'but I cannot be happy until I have dealt with that man.' And then she explained to me."

Janet had told him that for the sake of someone else she wished to avoid the scandal of police proceedings; that as for herself, her persecutor could do her no harm, for the secret of hers that he was exploiting she had already told to the someone else. She had made the confession soon after the blackmail had started.

"She told me that she had realised that it was the only thing to do," Leone said. "She had written about it to this someone and now she had received a letter in reply."

"It was to show Baldock that letter," Leone explained, "that she wished to find him. It was a clever move. It would frustrate that devil. I laughed when I thought of him reading it. But she would go further, and there I saw that she would help me. She would go to Baldock, show him the letter, and then tell him what she knew of his dirty game, and she would give him just twenty-four hours to leave the country, go right away, and she would tell him that the next day she would take all her information to the police at Scotland Yard. It was to save the scandal, you see, and Baldock would have gone. But she did not know who Baldock was."

Leone stopped abruptly, then, "I told her," he said dramatically. "I determined to risk everything. She had given me courage. If she succeeded I should be free. I could defy him. I would go to the police as she would go and tell them how I had been trapped."

A faint smile flickered on Salter's lips. The heroic sacrifice of Gulio Leone's was not very convincing. But he did not interrupt. He kept his eyes fixed on the notebook in which he was recording the man's story, and he continued.

3

Baldock was away then, in Paris, Leone believed. They discussed the scheme and Janet agreed to wait until they made the next demand on her. Then came the climax. Leone whipped himself into a dramatic frenzy.

"That day she telephoned to me. She arrived before lunch. Just a word passed between us. I tell her it is all right, she is to see me after she has seen Charlton. She come to this room. She was tired; her nerves were strained. But she was content. She had duped Charlton. She had told him that she must have time to pay what he asked of her. That she could not find the

money. He had spoken foul words to her and she had pleaded with him, and all the time to herself she was laughing, that terrible laugh of menace.

"He had come back here in a fury. He would not tell me why, but I knew. Charlton had told her he would give her a few hours to change her mind. I knew—we knew—that he had gone to his master. Miss Warren asked to rest here a little while, she was exhausted. She admitted it. I was distressed. In sympathy I suggested to her a glass of armagnac, a very special armagnac. She refused but I pressed her, for the strain was too great for her to bear. And she accepted. It gave her strength. She was in a few moments herself again, ready for the final act. We made the plan. When Charlton came back I would tell him she had gone along the beach, that I had seen her go. He would wait for her return—but she would not return. Instead she would telephone to me and I would tell Charlton the truth. How I waited for that revenge!" Leone sighed. "But she did not telephone to me."

He told me how he had watched her drive away an hour later. Of Charlton's return and his anger at not finding Janet there. Of the eagerness with which he had waited through the evening for the telephone call. And he mentioned the Black Boy.

Leone had suggested that she could stay there. He had never seen the inn, but Charlton had spoken of it as being close to Baldock's house. He described it as a rough country place but clean, he understood, and added, "Baldock is trying to buy it. He wants to shut it up. It is too near his house to please him. He is suspicious; he does not like to think strangers might stay there and watch him. He is always afraid of strangers, Baldock. He has reason to be. But he need not worry now." He gave a savage derisive chuckle. "He has other things to worry him, that devil."

Salter pulled him back to his story.

"Miss Warren did not telephone you as you say she had arranged to do. You must have suspected something was wrong, if you didn't know it. What did you do—nothing? That wants explaining, Mr. Leone." Salter spoke coldly.

"I did not know," Leone insisted passionately. "I could not think why she did not telephone. I sat here waiting until ten, eleven, twelve o'clock, waiting to hear from her. At two I went to bed. I could only believe he would not see her. She would try again in the morning. Or perhaps he had gone away after Charlton saw him. I thought of reasons. I dared not give up hope. She was to save me. In the morning the telephone rings. It is Baldock. I am to tell Charlton to go to him at once. Even then I did not lose hope."

The rest of the story he told in a dull, dejected way.

"Charlton came back after lunch. I could see that he was afraid. He told me that Baldock was in a great rage. The girl had discovered him and gone to him. She had begged him for time to pay. He had refused and so Charlton said, 'The little fool had gone and drowned herself.' But Baldock too was frightened. He thinks, so Charlton said, there would be many enquiries about the lady. Therefore he sends me my orders.

"I am to say nothing until I am asked, and then as little as I can. I am not to know that Miss West is the Miss Warren who sometimes stays here. Miss Carnon is to leave at once. Baldock has special work for her. Charlton too is leaving. I am to know nothing about him if I am asked. He will not stay again here until the trouble has blown over, he says. I read the inquest in the papers and I begin to wonder if after all it was not an accident. I read what her friend Miss Darcy says, what they all say, and I feel a great bitterness. That brave lady had succeeded, I am sure, but by accident she is killed and Baldock is free again.

"But later I get more instructions. Baldock sends for me to London, and I see that he is still afraid. He says he believes that someone is still enquiring about Miss Warren. If anybody at all suspicious comes here I am to report at once. Only one suspicious person came, Miss Darcy. But it was not about Miss Warren that she came. Still, I report to Baldock and he is still frightened. I know from his voice. Then I think it has all passed over. I resign myself. There is no hope for me. And then yesterday I get a message. Charlton and Miss Carnon will be here for dinner. I am to go with them afterwards to meet Baldock. I do not know why but I must obey my orders." Leone shrugged his shoulders in despairing fashion.

He told how Baldock had met them in his car near Whindleford and how they had driven slowly about the country for a long time, and Miss Carnon had told of a visit to some place of a man named Merrow, who kept the Black Boy inn, who was enquiring about Janet Warren.

Merrow had not realised that Leone did not know who he was. He was about, instinctively, to explain himself but Salter checked him.

"Baldock was in a fury," Leone said. "Everything, it is my fault. Have I not a cook in my kitchen who is a daughter of a man at the Black Boy? She is a spy. Through her this Merrow has heard that Miss Warren stays here. Why have I not dismissed this cook? Does Merrow come to the hotel? I insist

that I do not know the man. Miss Carnon supports me. She has never seen him. Baldock will not believe us. He blames her. She shall no longer work for him here for fear that she should be recognised. There is a terrible quarrel, she is virago, that woman. She is not afraid of Baldock. She threatens him and he becomes calmer. She is not to be dismissed. Presently she is to return to the reception office. But Baldock is frightened of something. He says he is going away for a holiday; he will arrange everything when he comes back. He becomes sullen and silent, he is plotting something. We return to Charlton. He drives me here, and I have not seen him since. That is all I know, sir. I swear to you I have told you the truth. I swear it. You will believe me?" He threw out his hand pleadingly. "You will help me?"

Salter said sternly, "Yes, I believe a good deal of what you have said. I will advise you, Mr. Leone. I should like to use a telephone: in private, please."

"Certainly, sir." Leone looked bemused, and rose. "In my room next door is a telephone. A direct line, you will not be overheard. I will show you."

Salter said, "I am going to ring up Detective Inspector Mace of the County Police. I am going to tell him that you have made an important statement to me. I am going to tell him that you wish to make a similar statement to him and that you will go, yourself, to the Police Station at Wilborough to see him at whatever hour he names. You are prepared to do that? If not, he will come here after you. You would be wise to go voluntarily."

"I will go," Leone said submissively.

"Very well." The two men left the room.

Leone returned in a few seconds. He seemed unaware of Merrow's presence and stood, head downbent, frowning in an attitude of despair.

Salter was some little time before he returned. Leone looked at him anxiously as he came into the room. But Salter addressed Hugh Merrow.

"I've been through to the hospital," he said. "The news is not too bad; she's recovered consciousness and they don't think there's any serious internal injury. I thought you'd like to know." Then he turned to the wretched Italian.

"Mr. Leone, I have told Inspector Mace that you will be at Wilborough Police Station at ten o'clock. In your own interests I advise you again to go," he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I

IT WAS four o'clock before Merrow went to his room that morning, and even then he left Salter at a table in the oak-beamed parlour, writing.

They had been sitting there for a couple of hours while Salter worked out a reconstruction of the murder of Janet Warren and of the events that led up to it.

Salter wanted to fill in the gaps in Leone's amazing story and in his own knowledge of the case.

Merrow answered question after question as Salter strove to get the story clear. Still there were gaps to fill, but the detective had hopes that the statements of Charlton and the two women would help there.

Once when they broke off for a drink he said, "I hope Mace will be duly grateful to me for doing his work for him, though I doubt it. But what I'm afraid of is that he'll be so much concerned in getting Baldock convicted that he won't care a damn what happens to the smaller fry. Pringles care very much. I'm out to get a blackmailing gang, he's only interested in a murder case."

Merrow spoke of Sir Philip Argent, wondering what he would think of the news, and Salter said:

"Gad, how right that man was. He never believed she committed suicide. He said she was a fighter and would be more likely to face the trouble than to submit. I wonder if he suspected the truth. I must ring him up first thing after breakfast."

They went back to sorting out their facts. Salter kept up a running commentary as he wrote.

"Leone's story supports Bailey about the bag. Baldock made a big bloomer there. Eve found the bag, you say? Must see her in the morning and check the exact place. Obviously what Baldock took was Sudbourne's letter. Didn't want that found, naturally. Nastier bit of work, Baldock, than even I imagined. Clearly he planned to kill Warren from the moment he knew she'd cornered him. Exactly what she told him we shall never know. Like to though. Must have convinced him he was done. Wonder why he sent Marks down to Chaldean. If she hasn't told I must get Mace to try and get it out of her. About that bag, Miss Darcy's still got it, I suppose. Can't worry her about it, but the police will want it and I'd like to look at it first. Do you remember what she found in it?"

"Mostly pulp," Merrow said. "She told me no papers were decipherable except a few treasury notes. I'll get it for you after breakfast if I can find it. Baldock made another bloomer there if we'd only thought of it. He said the bag was of old brocade. It isn't. It's made of a gay striped stuff, sort of peasant stuff you see abroad."

"The fellow was lying hard. Too hard. Which all goes to show how badly Miss Warren had scared him." Salter said, "An experienced crook like that doesn't easily lose his head. He knew she'd got him."

Even when he got to bed Merrow could not rest. His mind was furiously active. Yet when he did fall asleep it was into the deep unconsciousness of immense mental exhaustion.

He woke to find Eve by his bedside. She looked worried.

"It's after ten o'clock, sir," she said. "I did bring your tea as usual and I thought you answered me." The untouched tray on the table by his side bore that out.

"After ten!" Merrow exclaimed. "Good lord, Eve! Is Mr. Salter—Mr. Pollock down?"

"Why yes, sir. He had his breakfast ever so early and he's gone out." Then unable to contain her news longer, Eve burst out. "Oh, sir, something awful's going on. There's been policemen down at Mr. Baldock's all night, and they do say he's been taken up for something dreadful and is over at Wilborough. A gentleman like Mr. Baldock! And there's poor Miss Darcy. Mr. Pollock was telling dad she'd had an awful accident. Sir, what's it all about?"

Merrow said, "It means, Eve, that Mr. Baldock wasn't quite the nice gentleman we thought he was and poor Miss Darcy was knocked down by his car last night and very seriously injured. That's all I can tell you now. I'll be down within twenty minutes. Get me some toast and an egg or something."

Eve departed, looking thoroughly bewildered.

Argent was waiting for him in the hall when he came downstairs a quarter of an hour later.

2

Sir Philip had come straight from the Wilborough hospital. He had heard the news from Salter early that morning. He brought a reassuring report. Gwen had a broken arm and it was yet too soon to be sure what the results of the concussion shock might be. But otherwise they were hopeful that her injuries were not grave.

Argent said, "If anything does go wrong you can rely on me, Merrow, to see that she gets the best man in the country to

treat her. That's a part in this terrible business that I can undertake. But, my God! What a ghastly mess up!"

Tragedy piled on tragedy. Windham, the policeman, had died. Nurse Marshall had gone—overboard from the yacht as she came up the river, so Salter had told Argent. Charlton and the woman Marks were safely in custody and Baldock was to be brought before a special court at Wilborough at noon.

Argent had to get back to Oldford but he promised to keep in touch with the hospital, and Merrow spent a very unhappy morning.

The inn was buzzing with strangers, for the wildest rumours were running in the neighbourhood. Trade was brisk and again and again Merrow heard old Paternoster, quiet and apparently unperturbed, telling some curious sensation seeker, "Yes, sir, a very bad business. No, sir, I've heard no details yet." Or in reply to some persistent questioner, "No, sir, I'm afraid I can tell you nothing."

But Stephen told Merrow that the police had been working at the Priors since daybreak, searching the house and, he quoted Hawes who had looked in for a quiet drink, they haven't found a single incriminating thing in the place.

Salter had already told him the main facts of the case and Merrow was grateful to the old fellow for not wanting to talk much about it.

"I had a feeling that it was a very bad business from the beginning," he said gravely, "but I never thought it would turn out like this. But there it is, Mr. Merrow; what can't be cured must be endured. I'm sorry for you, sir. Just when the old Black Boy was beginning to do so well. But it'll be all right."

Merrow sat in the office bar waiting for Salter's return and admiring the unruffled way Stephen and Eve went on with their normal routine.

Salter turned up just before lunch, looking brisk and cheerful and showing no signs of fatigue.

Things were going well, he said. Baldock had been remanded for the customary seven days pending the collection of further evidence. He had to face a double charge: the murder of Janet Warren and of being an accessory to the murder of Windham.

Charlton and Marks were to be charged later with being accessories to the murder of Janet.

"But that won't be pressed," Salter said. "Very doubtful if the police could make a case there. It'll be blackmail they'll have to face. I've given the Superintendent enough to justify another warrant. And they're talking too. Charlton's lost his head he's so damned terrified of the murder charge. To save

himself he's as good as confessed to the blackmail. Marks is different. She's a cool, clever, cunning little devil. She's talking right enough but her line is that she was merely employed by Baldock as a confidential agent to watch his interests. At Shinglemouth it was, to watch Leone."

"But what about Chaldean?" Merrow asked. "How does she explain that?"

"She said nothing about it till she was faced with Leone's statement and a threat to produce you to identify her. Then she told the truth or a bit of it. She swears Baldock sent her down there to get some information about Miss Warren. Marks says she didn't ask why, she only obeyed orders."

"What the devil does she mean? Baldock knew all about Miss Warren," Merrow said.

"Eyewash," Salter said. "They soon got her rattled. She started a new lie; said that Baldock admitted to being worried about something Miss Warren had told him, then got tied up and let out that he told her someone had been making enquiries down there about Marshall and she was to find out who. They asked her why it took her over a month and she hedged again. But it came out at last. Baldock was afraid someone would make enquiries and she was set to watch there till the storm blew over. She was coming back the day after you turned up. But the little devil sticks to it that she knew nothing more than Baldock told her and that she thought Miss Warren had committed suicide. She admits he told her that and he was worried for fear of what might come out at the inquest and afterwards."

"The fact of the case is, I suppose, that Miss Warren had traced Marshall's connection with Charlton and Baldock and told him so," Merrow commented.

"Not a doubt of it," Salter said definitely.

Salter was hurrying over his lunch. He wanted to get on to the Priors to see how the search was progressing and had arranged to meet Mace there. But before he had finished Eve came to say that Hawes wanted to see him.

Hawes was excited.

"They've found something, sir," he said. "Hid away in a sort of cellar belonging to the old ruins, a regular strong room packed with papers. The inspector asked me to drop in and let you know."

ness, he said. But he was persuaded, and for the first time he entered Baldock's house.

A constable directed them to the back door, where they found Mace. The inspector was jubilant.

"I'll show you something, Mr. Salter," he said. "I've never seen anything like it in *my* life and I don't believe you have. Talk about a skeleton in the cupboard, my oath! he's got about a couple of thousand skeletons here. Come this way."

He led them along a passage and opened a door. They saw a small but well-designed wine cellar, stone flagged, with stout wooden bins, and two of the walls were of ancient masonry, a survival of the old priory. Merrow noticed that Mr. Baldock's stock of wine was negligible, although he had professed to be a lover of wine.

"Kept something more valuable to him than drink here," Mace chuckled. "Found it by sheer chance. One of my chaps climbing up to see what was on top felt this shelf give. Had a look at it to see if he'd broken anything and—this." Mace seized a shelf and pulled it forward. With it came a section of match boarding at the back, displaying a small door from which a few stone steps led. The inspector stooped and went forward, pushing the door open. They followed into blackness. Mace switched on a light.

"Here are the skeletons," he said. "Lord! I bet there'd be a lot of people sleeping badly to-night if they knew what's in here." Merrow saw a small stone chamber with vaulted roof and set around its aged walls a number of modern filing cabinets. "There's the stock in trade," Mace went on. "All labelled as neat as if it was a London office."

It took Merrow some moments to realise the meaning of this strange chamber. But when he did he was first dumbfounded then furiously angry. Baldock had neatly filed in folders in those cabinets a huge mass of potential blackmailing material—letters, memoranda, photographs, cheques and papers of every kind.

Salter said, "By God, he was thorough!"

"Thorough! Damn it all, he could turn up some shady detail about half the rich people in the country in a couple of minutes by the look of it. I know his sort will pay for any scraps likely to be useful: dud cheques, incriminating letters and so on. But this! I don't mind telling you it's got me scared. I've had a look at one or two and then I phoned the Super for instructions, and he's advising the Chief. No one ought to see this stuff—it ought to be burned. Baldock was clever, damned clever, I grant you, but damn it I'm not squeamish but this sort of thing is going a bit too far."

Salter nodded.

"You're right, inspector," he agreed. "And I give you best. I knew Baldock was as rotten as anything ever made, and I knew he was cleyer. But I didn't know he went in for it on wholesale lines like this. But it's interesting. Cunning hiding-place too."

"That's not all," Mace said. "Have a look here." He opened one of the bigger cabinets. It was crammed with bank notes neatly done up in packets. "English and American mostly, as far as I can see. Mr. Salter, there must be ten thousand quid here, more probably. The man's a miser."

"And some of it's stuff that's been paid to him and he's afraid the numbers were taken," Salter said quietly. "There are a hundred fivers my client paid over to Charlton not long ago. I've got the numbers. It would be interesting if we found them. Quite good evidence."

"Evidence—I should think it would be," Mace exclaimed. "I never thought of that, Mr. Salter."

"And while we're talking about evidence," Salter went on, "you might have a look in the A to D cabinet under Dennington. It might help the case against Charlton."

After a few minutes search Mace produced a folder. Salter took it from him, went through it carefully and said suddenly, "Got him. There's all you want here. Everything he used to squeeze my client. You've seen the Warren file, I suppose."

Mace said, "Yes. It's the only one I've taken. There's the letter in it from her fiancé, Baldock was fool enough to keep that."

Merrow turned away. He was nauseated. It was perfectly right, he admitted, that these two men should treat this bestial business in so matter-of-fact a way. It was their job. Crime, even in this horrible form, interested them. Baldock was clever, they admired his cunning.

But to Hugh Merrow those glossy filing cabinets with their horrible contents were abominable beyond expression. In them he saw only misery, drawn-out suffering, despair for hundreds of wretched people.

He thought of Janet Warren as he had seen her at dinner that night. Of Gwen in the fierce headlights of Baldock's car, her arms thrown out to ward off the coming menace, of her cry as she fell. He thought of the mellow Black Boy and his dream that seemed so completely to have faded. He wanted to get out of this place, this charnel house of hidden shames.

"I think I'll be getting off," he said, and Salter broke off his conversation with Mace to answer cheerily, "Right you are, Mr. Merrow. I'll be along presently."

Merrow went out, past saluting policemen, into the heat of

the afternoon, cold and dejected. Yet as he turned the corner by the inn and looked up as he always did at the hanging sign, the Black Boy seemed to have a smile in his queer white eyes, and suddenly the gloom lifted in his heart.

THE LAST CHAPTER

INSTINCTIVELY Hugh Merrow checked the car as it topped the gentle rise where the road swung sharply to the left.

The tall beech tree at the corner was nearly bare. The roof came in sight, that rollicking roof of mellow red tiles mottled with lichens and stonecrop. From the great upstanding chimney of narrow Tudor brick, blue wood smoke was drifting lazily into the still frosty air.

Merrow gave a little sigh of satisfaction. The Black Boy was still there, dozing peacefully in the fading November afternoon light.

The sun was sinking behind Haverly Great Wood, a great ball of copper in a misty sky. Suddenly through a clear patch a beam shot out for a moment and focused on the old sign-board, and from a sombre background two merry white eyes in a red-turbaned, black face seemed to smile knowingly.

Merrow turned the car slowly into the inn yard and brought it to rest beyond the doors of what had once been a loose box. A small, stumpy, beady-eyed little man came hurrying from the inn at the sound of the car. Merrow called to him.

"Afternoon, Jim. Bring my luggage in and lock the garage for me, will you," he said. "It's cold. Going to be a hard frost to-night, I should say."

Jim Bailey lifted a forefinger jerkily towards his forehead.

"You're right, sir," he said. "Sharp frost last night too. That'll bring the leaves off."

Merrow passed into the inn by the back door.

It was very quiet and peaceful inside. The grandfather in the hall ticked steadily. The parlour door was open and a blazing wood fire in the open hearth crackled cheerily, its flickering flames reflected on the polished timbers of the wall.

From somewhere at the back old Stephen Paternoster appeared, short, sturdy, grizzle-haired, in cord breeches and soft leather gaiters, looking more like a farmer than ever. The old fellow's eyes wrinkled in a welcoming smile.

"Glad to see you back again, sir," he said. "And I hope you had a good holiday."

"Grand, Stephen. Best I ever had in my life," Merrow answered.

"And I'm sure you deserved it, sir, after all that bad business. But, there, I reckon we've finished with that now."

"I hope so." Merrow had drifted into the parlour and was warming his hands by the blazing fire. "Stephen, I'm cold and thirsty. I want a drink. What do you recommend? Something long and warming."

"Well, sir, what about a pint of strong ale?"

"A pint, Stephen!"

"Won't do you no harm, sir. It's drawing lovely. I broached a fresh barrel last night, one of those firkins you ordered off Linton's. They've given us the right stuff this time."

"All right, Stephen, it sounds good to me. Better bring two pints." Merrow laughed.

Stephen departed to return with two foaming mugs.

"Well, Stephen, how have things been going since I've been away?" Merrow asked after a long drink.

"Quiet, sir, but not too bad. Chance trade very good, considering the time of year, and one or two in most nights. Lady and gentleman went this morning, been here since Monday. And we'll be full up for the week-end."

"Shall we, by jove. That's good, Stephen."

"Yes, sir." Old Paternoster tried to disguise his satisfaction. "A shooting party, four gentlemen. Was here last week too. Used to stay at the George. But they reckoned maybe they'd be more comfortable and at home like here."

"Had enough of snack bars and silver-plated fittings, eh, Stephen? I told you there was something in the old things, didn't I?"

"That's what one of the gentlemen was saying," Stephen answered gravely. "And I think they like Milly's cooking too."

"Milly settling down all right?"

"Yes. She likes it, and reckons she'll like it more when we're busier."

"Bailey happy in his new job?"

Stephen laughed.

"That's a masterpiece, that is, sir. Little Jimmy Bailey—you'd think he'd been in regular service all his life. He's getting on nice with the garden too, and that wanted some digging. I always reckoned if he were handled right he'd make a decent workman. Yes, he's happy enough, sir."

Merrow took another pull at his mug.

"This is good beer, Stephen," he said. "Just what I wanted."

"That's what the shooting gentlemen said when I recommended it, sir."

"Splendid. The old Black Boy will be getting quite a good name again soon."

Stephen looked about him.

"I can't hardly believe it sometimes," he said seriously.

"How the old place have changed——"

"That's exactly what it hasn't done, Stephen," Merrow put in. "I was only thinking as I drove up that nothing really changes the old place. It's too old, too settled. It knows its job and it does it. It's had too many knocks in its long life to be worried by little things like, like—that unhappy business of Miss Warren's, for instance. I bet it's known worse troubles than that in its time, and worse landlords than you and me. But it's beaten them all."

Stephen looked puzzled. All he said was, "Yes, I reckon there is something about the old house that make you respect it."

Merrow spoke more lightly.

"Well, Stephen, I hope I'm back to work for good now. There's lots to be done before next April. By the way, I must have a word with Milly presently. I want a rather special dinner to-morrow night. Sir Philip Argent—you remember him—the doctor who used to come here——"

"I remember him well, sir."

"He's driving—Miss Darcy—down to-morrow, and I want to show them what the Black Boy can do."

"What did you have in mind, sir? Milly'll manage it, I'm sure."

"Something simple but really English. I've brought a ~~box~~ of oysters down with me. Then I thought we'd have some partridges. Milly will have to fix up a fancy sweet for the lady, but the doctor and I will have cheese. We've got a Stilton in good condition, haven't we?"

"Yes, sir. A beauty."

"Right. Then if you can get some walnuts, a bit late, but you might try. And some fresh fruit. We've got apples——"

"There's some nice Coxes, just about ready now, up in the loft."

"Well, see what you can get. Send Bailey round scrounging and tell him to buy the best if we're short."

"You'll deal with the wine, sir."

"Yes. We'll see what they feel like. But I'll get up a couple of bottles of that nineteen twelve port to-night. Give it time to settle and get the right temperature. Sir Philip's rather fussy about his port."

"The shooting gentlemen have been rather taken with that nineteen twelve."

"Have they, by gad; I hope they haven't drunk it all."

"There's not a lot left. And to tell you the truth, sir, when it came in I never thought we'd sell a bottle."

Merrow finished his drink.

"I'll get along and unpack, Stephen, and then come and start work. It's good to be back again."

"I am glad to hear you say that," the old man said with obvious sincerity. "You know, sir, I sometimes had a feeling that all this—this trouble you've been through since you bought the old house—would have sort of turned you against it."

"Not a bit of it, Stephen."

"And the young lady too. I never thought she'd want to see us again. She's all right now, sir?"

"Quite."

"Will she be carrying on with the furnishings and that here now, sir?"

"Yes. She'll be staying quite a long time, Stephen," Merrow hesitated. Then he blurted out, "In fact, Stephen, I hope she'll be staying for the rest of her life. You see—we got married a fortnight ago."

"What, sir!" Old Paternoster's hand went out. "Now I am glad to hear that, Mr. Merrow. I am glad. Just what the old Black Boy wants, a nice lady to look after things. Now that is good news. And fancy me never suspecting."

Stephen picked up the two empty mugs.

"I'm going for two more pints, sir, to drink your and your lady's health," he announced firmly.

THE END

